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# Winged Women: Stewardesses, Sexism, and American Society

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**WINGED WOMEN: STEWARDESSES, SEXISM, AND AMERICAN SOCIETY**

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts in Humanities

by

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San Rafael, California

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the Department of Graduate Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Humanities. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## ABSTRACT

Airline stewardesses in the decades between 1950 and 1980 reflected a microcosm of the American feminist movement. Subjected to what feminist theorist Laura Mulvey called “the male gaze,” in which women are viewed as objects who exist for the viewer’s pleasure, they were selected for their youth and beauty and trained to serve. Regulations about height, weight, age, and marital status, ensured that stewardesses were young, thin, and single, and women in this job were fetishized as everything from girl next door to sex kitten. Stewardesses were expected to fulfill archetypal and stereotypical female roles, including mother, nurse, comforter, and idealized wife. However, they also defied the role of object or victim through tenacity, independence, and professionalism, helping forge the way for women who wanted to pursue a career instead of—or in addition to—marriage and family. This thesis includes oral history interviews with former American Airline stewardesses (including my mother, the inspiration for this project) and investigates how their experiences intersected with traditional gender roles in the American workplace and the shifting social, economic, and political climate of the Civil Rights and Women’s Movements.

## Acknowledgements and Dedication

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This work is dedicated to my mom, Donna (Gilligan) Tracey, whose story has been an inspiration to me since I was a little girl looking at the pages of her stewardess scrapbook.

## Introduction

In a back room at an Italian restaurant in Houston, eight women gather to reminisce, share, and laugh. The oldest woman in the room is 94 and started her flying career in the 1940s. The youngest retired after September 11, 2001, when she no longer felt safe in the skies she had loved so much. Some are meeting for the first time, while others are old friends.

All are members of The Kiwis, a social and charitable organization of women who worked as American Airlines stewardesses. The organization was named for the flightless birds of New Zealand in reference to the fact that its earliest members had been forced to retire either when they married or turned 32. This particular chapter of The Kiwis, one of 44 across 21 states, consists of about 25 members; the national membership comprises hundreds of women.

More than just a professional organization, the Kiwis are a sisterhood. The women who have gathered for this monthly Kiwis luncheon embrace—both literally and figuratively—the newest arrival, a member of the Southwest Florida chapter who has recently relocated to Texas. Donna Gilligan Tracey, who flew from 1959 until 1963, is also my mother. She is the inspiration for this project.

Feminist theorist Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of the “male gaze” in 1975 to describe the way women are presented in film as objects to be viewed and judged according to superficial, gender-normative standards. Since that time, the theory of male gaze has been applied more broadly in feminist critique. This thesis examines the work of stewardesses and how they were subjected to the male gaze by men, women, and themselves. Its purpose is to explore the tension between the oversimplified stereotypes



of stewardesses created by societal assumptions and popular culture representations and the often unacknowledged contributions they made to the advancement of women in the American workforce.

For years, stewardesses were viewed as exemplars of femininity by the predominantly male passengers they served. Beauty, youth, and charm were requirements of the job. What was largely overlooked in the narrative about stewardesses was the tenacity, intelligence, and sheer bravery of these women. Often stereotyped as victims of sexism and objectification, they were also forces to be reckoned with, instrumental in challenging these perceptions and helping change the landscape of the American workforce for women.

Many early stewardesses had never even flown on a plane before undertaking their new careers. Yet they took to the skies with aplomb and determination to live a life of adventure and independence that was virtually unheard for women at that time. In so doing, they were jumping into the unknown, bucking traditional gender roles and familial expectations.

The following pages include the history of stewardesses and the words of several former American Airlines stewardesses reflecting on their careers. The use of the word “stewardess” is intentional throughout, as is the occasional use of the first person. During the time period this thesis primarily covers, the 1940s through the 1970s, only women were able to work as flight attendants and the only term applied to them was stewardess. Their gender was a requirement, a selling point, and eventually, a point of controversy.

In doing my research, I conducted several hours’ worth of oral history interviews with women who held the job long before the more gender-neutral term “flight attendant”

was adopted. In addition to my mother, I interviewed four other women whom I met through The Kiwi Club's National Vice President, Casey Cacioppo Bode. Two of the interviews were conducted in Texas, and three in California. This thesis includes the oral histories of the following former stewardesses:

Linda Terry, 94, who now lives in Houston, TX. Terry began her flying career with American Overseas Airlines in 1946 when one of the requirements was to be a nurse and flew until her marriage in 1952;

Betty Leson, 82, of Santa Rosa, CA, who was a member of the first class to graduate from American Airlines' new Stewardess College in Dallas Ft. Worth in 1958, and retired when she got married;

Lona Poehlmann, 80, of Petaluma, CA, started flying in 1958, retired when she got married two years later, and then returned to the job in 1990 and flew until 2003;

Donna Tracey, 79, of Houston, TX, who began her career as a stewardess in 1959, kept her marriage a secret, and retired in 1963 when her first pregnancy made it impossible for her to continue working; and

Mary Ann "Casey" Cacioppo Bode, 71, of Healdsburg, CA, who joined American Airlines as a stewardess in 1966 and remained until her retirement in 2003.

All of these women still display the influence of their stewardess training. They all have beautifully manicured nails, fashionably styled hair, and tastefully chosen jewelry. Their clothing is attractive but not flashy. Their manners are flawless, their warmth sincere, and their smiles ever-present. They are funny, sassy, and self-assured. Their stories highlight the changes in their chosen jobs, and also serve as a microcosm for the changing face of women's roles in the American workforce.

This thesis opens with the background and history of stewardess as a career option for women. Chapter 2 explores the training stewardesses received to prepare for the job. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the male gaze and how advertising, popular culture, and the media utilized it to exploit the image of stewardesses. Chapter 5 addresses the ways in which stewardesses worked collectively to resist the male gaze and its inherent objectification. Woven throughout are the voices and experiences of the trailblazing American Airlines stewardesses whose shared experiences, struggles, and triumphs are a story of feminism in America.

## Chapter 1: Not Suitable for a Woman

In America in the 1950s, many women were not thinking about careers beyond the home. Being a wife and mother was largely perceived to be a fulfilling career in its own right, and it was the accepted traditional route for most young women to follow. For those who were interested in something different, options were limited. Their choices often were restricted by preconceptions about what types of work were appropriate for females. Decades later, these beliefs were still strong, as educators Theodore A. Chandler, Robert F. Sawicki, and Joan M. Stryffeler found. They interviewed 191 female and 208 male eighth graders about gender stereotypes and found that 61% of the girls and 78.4% of the boys agreed with the statement, “the most important work for a woman is that of wife and mother” (1981, 101).

According to United States Census data from 1960, a total of 48,870,000 men were in the workforce, as opposed to only 23,272,000 women. (By way of comparison, 2008 data reflects that 77,486,000 men were employed, as were 67,876,000 women. While men still made up the majority of the workforce, women had closed the gap considerably.) Of those working women, the 1960 Census indicates that 24% were single, 59.9% were married, and 16.1% were widowed or divorced. Common career choices for women included teacher, nurse, and secretary. The eighth-graders in the Chandler, Sawicki, and Stryffeler study agreed overwhelmingly (72.3% of the girls and 84.1% of the boys) that “women are naturally suited to certain service-oriented jobs” such as nursing (104).

Of the career choices available to women, one stood out as promising a life of glamour, travel, and adventure: stewardess. The burgeoning airline industry and the

increasing popularity of commercial air travel meant new opportunities for young women. A 1961 ad by American Airlines that ran in *Glamour* and *Mademoiselle* enticed young women to consider a job by emphasizing the freedom and independence it offered. “This morning, sight-seeing in New York—and in about five hours, I’ll meet my date for dinner in San Francisco” (Mahler 154). The ad also mentions the “prestige” of the job, as well as the generous salary: \$335 per month to start, with a raise to \$365 per month after a year. A teacher in 1960 made approximately \$416 per month (National Center for Education Statistics), while nurses and secretaries in 1961 made \$368 and \$344, respectively (Occupational Wage Survey). However, stewardesses only worked a total of about two weeks each month, with their flying time interspersed with layovers and days off at home. Women in this profession had the option of taking second jobs to supplement their incomes—which many took advantage of—or simply enjoying the excess of leisure time.

In the early days of the commercial airline industry, traveling by airplane was a luxury. Passengers wore their finest clothes on flights and treated the trip like the special occasion it was. It also wasn’t cheap. Airfares were regulated by the United States government and were standard; there was no competition among airliners to offer the lowest fares. Given this, the way they differentiated themselves in order to attract and retain passengers was through offering exceptional service and by coming up with novel ideas such as American Airlines’s short-lived on-board piano lounges. Stewardesses were the key ingredient in this service model.

A 1945 study on career goals for post-WWII girls and young women indicated that for the 360 high school girls surveyed, the job of “air stewardess” was second only to

housewife as one to which they would give “serious consideration” (Scott 63). For the 346 college women in the study, it fell behind housewife, high school teacher, social worker, and personnel worker. Interestingly, airplane pilot was also of “serious consideration” for high school girls. The author noted, “The plane pilot and stewardess represent very recent interests and have a more glamorous appeal” (Scott 63).

With few exceptions, the jobs of interest to these girls and young women fell into traditionally defined gender roles. The jobs which participants most frequently discounted as possibilities because they were “not suitable for a woman” were dentist, engineer, and lawyer (Scott 65). It is worth noting that 27 respondents (14 in high school and 13 in college) also stated that “airplane pilot” fell into this category, despite the fact that a total of 108 of their peers expressed that they were either “seriously interested” or “might consider” this choice of profession (Scott 65). This may reflect that the roles of women in the workforce were already beginning to evolve and challenge established gender expectations.

Even for those women who did opt to enter the workforce, employment was often seen as a temporary situation. For most, working was something they would do until they (inevitably) got married. “When the majority of flight attendants who are currently employed entered the occupation in the 1960s, they entered what they anticipated would be a short-term job that they would leave in one to two years” (Lessor 38). This was nothing new; as early as the 1940s, head of American Stewardess Service Newt Wilson stated, “American stewardesses are the most marrying women I have ever seen. They marry pilots, co-pilots, passengers, mechanics and everyone else connected with aviation. It’s simply because everything seems so much more adventurous and glamorous up in the

air than it does when you've got both feet solidly on the ground" (Mahler 71). By the 1950s, the average time a woman spent as a stewardess was 21 months, and around 38 left their positions every month in order to marry (Mahler 106).

There was a certain novelty associated with the idea of becoming a stewardess, as commercial air travel was a relatively recent endeavor. The earliest commercial flights were dedicated to mail delivery, with twelve air mail routes divided among several private companies after a competitive bidding process. Several of these companies later combined to create what would become American Airlines.

In addition to delivering the mail, these early routes also transported a small number of brave passengers. For American Airlines, the occasion of the first flight with air travelers was met with fanfare. The trip was a combination rail and air route, beginning with a train leaving New York with six passengers in June 1929. They traveled this way as far as Cleveland, where they transferred onto three separate planes that would fly them to Garden City, Kansas. Along the way, the planes made stops in Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City, where 1,500 people greeted the historic flights. After reaching Garden City, the six passengers boarded another train, which took them the rest of the way to Los Angeles. In total, the journey took 65 hours and cost each passenger \$85. Thanks to heavy press coverage of this event, combined with Charles Lindbergh's groundbreaking 1927 overseas flight, the general public was inspired to dream of air travel as something within their reach.

The first airline to utilize stewardesses was Boeing Air Transport, which later became United Airlines. An enterprising registered nurse named Ellen Church approached the airline in 1930 and suggested that it would be prudent for them to have

nurses aboard their flights. She and seven other women were to become the very first to fulfill the role. According to author Elissa Stein in her history of stewardesses, these early career women were responsible for a little bit of everything: “Dressed in military-style uniforms, they served food and beverages, soothed nervous passengers, loaded luggage, helped refuel the plane, and even nailed down passengers’ wicker chairs to the plane’s floor when necessary” (2). They made themselves indispensable through their willingness to do whatever it took to ensure customer comfort and happiness.

American Airlines graduated its first class of stewardesses in 1933. The class consisted of four women, all of whom were registered nurses. The initial idea behind hiring these positions was to ensure safety, provide care to sick or nervous passengers, and help the flight crew with various tasks. According to Mahler, “Registered nurses were women that had been trained and practiced at being sensitive to people’s needs. The company felt that registered nurses led a disciplined life and would transfer easily to this new vocation and lifestyle” (35).

Those first stewardesses were required to weigh 118 pounds or less, and be no taller than five feet four inches. This was primarily because they were flying aboard the Curtiss Condor, a very small 15-passenger plane, which had strict limitations as to how much weight could be carried safely. Less logically, they were also required to be between 20 and 26 years old.

American’s first passenger flight to offer stewardess service took place in May 1933, traveling from Chicago to Newark, with stops in Detroit and Buffalo. The flight cost \$47.95 and took six hours (Mahler 44). (Today, a nonstop route from Chicago to Newark takes just over two hours.) In 1936, the airline began offering in-flight meals,



adding a new responsibility to the work of stewardesses. In addition to pouring coffee and ensuring passenger safety and comfort, they were now tasked with preparing and serving hot meals aboard planes that were often cramped and during flights that were often bumpy.

With the onset of World War II, many stewardesses left the commercial airlines and joined the military to put their nursing knowledge to more pressing use. To fill the positions these departing stewardesses left available, American dropped the requirement for applicants to be registered nurses. It was now sufficient for women to have two years of college before beginning their flying careers. Competition for acceptance to the job became fierce. According to Stein, “For the lucky few who were hired by airlines, the rules they were bound to after graduation were rigorous—girdles and heels on every flight, strict height and weight restrictions, rigid hair and makeup rules, mandatory retirement at a certain age” (2). Several of those new stewardesses during the war years were met with another new requirement: changing their names to something that sounded more “American.” Thus, Lanelle Braeutigam became Lanelle Braun, Edna Schweinfurth became Edna Smith, and Nancy Poidomani became Nancy Page (Mahler 83, 112).

In 1945, American flew its first overseas passenger flight, from Boston to London, with stops in Newfoundland and Ireland. The cost of the flight was \$572, and ushered in a new era of international travel. Passengers flew aboard a DC-4 propeller plane equipped with sleeping berths. The stewardesses’ job now included preparing these berths for the passengers’ comfort partway through the flight.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the airlines’ fleet of planes underwent constant and rapid improvement and innovation. With each engineering and technological

advancement came new equipment and safety features for stewardesses to familiarize themselves with, and additional roles and responsibilities for them to shoulder. The early DC-2, DC-3, and DC-4 propeller planes gave way to the DC-6, which flew at an impressive 315 miles per hour and boasted amenities such as ovens, refrigerated food areas, and sleeper cabins. The DC-6 also represented the introduction of the emergency evacuation slide. Later, American included the Convair 240 to its fleet, which provided options for carry-on luggage for the first time.

The 1950s saw the most significant air travel advancement yet: the shift from propeller planes to jets. In January 1959, a Lockheed turbo-prop Electra flew from New York to Chicago, and shortly thereafter the first completely jet-powered airplane—a Boeing 707—flew from Los Angeles to New York. The flight time was practically unheard of in those days: four hours and three minutes. It was now much faster, easier, and more comfortable to fly coast to coast, and more people than ever were taking advantage of this.

Meal service continued to improve as well, complete with appetizers, filet mignon and side dishes, and desserts. (Liquor service had begun in 1956). On the 707s, meals were an elegant, gourmet affair featuring “printed menus, and ... leisurely courses” complete with “white linen tablecloths ... delicate china, crystal, and silver utensils, heavy salt and pepper shakers ... silver napkin rings with engraved American Airlines insignia along with tulip shaped champagne glasses” (Mahler139).

Air travel was becoming more commonplace, and with this increase came a higher demand for young women interested in a career as stewardesses. In 1953, American employed 1,050 stewardesses. The basic requirements for the job were

stringent: “registered nurse, college graduate, girls with two years of college or two years of business experience, or high school graduate with extensive business training...single, twenty-one to twenty-eight years old, 5’2” to 5’7” tall with a maximum proportionate weight of 130 pounds” (Mahler 105).

In December 1953, American implemented a new rule for its stewardesses. They were now required to sign an agreement that read: “I will abide by the policy of the company that my employment as a stewardess will not be continued beyond the end of the month during which my 32<sup>nd</sup> birthday falls” (Mahler 116). Women could then choose to retrain for a position as a ground crew member with American. The airline’s justification for this was that by the age of 32, stewardesses who were still working had learned all they could and had no opportunity for advancement, whereas retraining would offer them the chance for new challenges and growth. The fact remained, however, that at that time approximately 80% of air travelers were men (Binder 39), and the unspoken truth was that the airlines felt young, attractive women were best suited for the job of serving those predominantly male passengers. In fact, in 1953 United Airlines introduced special flights called “The New York Executive,” which were advertised as being “for men only!” (Omelia & Waldock 52).

In exchange for this agreement, the stewardess union (Air Lines Stewards and Stewardesses Association, or ALSSA, established in 1944) negotiated a salary that was quite competitive for the time: \$255 per month, with an increase to \$270 after six months and \$285 after a year and \$10 annually after that, as well as meal expenses and taxi fare to and from the airport (Mahler 119). These perks made the job more desirable than ever for young women seeking adventure and independence.

The performance of stewardesses was, of course, under close scrutiny from passengers, male flight crews, and the supervisors who frequently traveled with the purpose of observing and evaluating their jobs. To ensure that they were up to the task, airlines implemented training programs to prepare these women for a life in the public eye.

## Chapter 2: Girls Seeking Adventure and Travel

To prepare young women for the responsibilities they were about to undertake, the airlines implemented specialized training programs. As the airplanes became more sophisticated, so did stewardess schools.

When Linda Terry joined American Overseas Airlines in 1946, her training consisted of a one-week course. She had already received her Bachelor Degree in Nursing from the University of Minnesota, with the goal of becoming a stewardess when she finished. She was a member of the first class to be trained for the new international arm of American, consisting of about 15 pursers (all male) and 15 stewardesses. The pursers were responsible for maintaining paperwork during flights, as well as collecting money, preparing meals, and generally acting in a supervisory role over the stewardesses. During the stewardesses' brief course, they learned the basic safety features of the Lockheed Constellations and Douglas DC-4s, as well as the basic service functions they would be expected to perform.

At 94, Terry has retained the impeccable style and air of sophistication she cultivated so many years ago. The streak of sassy independence that led her to become a stewardess in the first place is still evident. "It was the happiest day of my life when I was accepted to be a stewardess with American Overseas Airlines," she said. She was initially drawn to the idea of being a stewardess because of the prospect of traveling and for the simple love of flying. She was unconcerned with what her family might have thought of her choice. "Well, they didn't have much to say about it," she said. "I mean, that's what I wanted to be and yeah, they went along with it."

Asked if she felt prepared for her job after such a short training period, Terry said, “Oh, of course. Oh yeah, you could do anything you had to, yes. And it was exciting.” At the time of her training, there was very little emphasis on cultivating and maintaining appearance. Instead, the emphasis was on the nursing degree requirement as opposed to image. “Well, the reason they hired nurses was because they wanted the publicity in case there was a kid born on the airplane, it got all over the newspapers and we had a kit with even narcotics in it.”

There were height and weight requirements, and stewardesses were expected to be neat in appearance. “I forget the dimensions, but decent looking, you had to be smooth looking, and all of that,” said Terry. However, there were no classes at her stewardess training regarding hair and makeup: “No way, uh-uh. No, you were you, and you just had to wear high heels and stuff like that.”

A typical work day for Terry involved flying from New York to Ireland and then on to another European city such as Stockholm, Paris, or Berlin. The return flight in a prop plane going against the wind took a whopping 13 hours. During the flight, Terry was expected to ensure the comfort and happiness of all passengers by providing meal service and preparing sleeping berths:

We had a purser and a stewardess on all flights, and we had a grill in the tail of the plane and a purser would do the grilling. We would make steaks and the stewardesses would make hors d’oeuvres and they would pass them around. We had about 30 passengers and it was a festive affair. They all dressed up real nice—we had important people—and then at night we had to pull down the berths from the ceiling that would hold one person, and then the four seats on the bottom we’d have to make them up and that would hold two people (Terry).

By the time Terry finished college with her nursing degree and started flying, the airlines had dropped their requirement for applicants to be nurses. For those women who

were not nurses, the training was much more intensive. According to Mahler, the early classes of non-nurse stewardesses underwent three months of training, with an eye towards teaching them the same basic health care skills that nurses had learned in college. They were also trained in infant care and birthing procedures. Early airline advertisements encouraged women to fly as passengers, secure in the knowledge that the stewardesses would be on hand to help feed, diaper, and comfort their babies for them.

In the late 1940s, American Airlines moved towards more organized, standardized systems of training for its stewardesses. Early schools were housed at hotels purchased specifically for that purpose so they could house young women and provide on-site classes. The first such Stewardess Training Center opened in Tulsa in 1946 at the Bradford Hotel, and included six classrooms and “complete cabin mock-ups for the DC-3 and DC-4 Flagships” (Mahler 99). The following year, the school moved to another hotel, this time in Ardmore, Oklahoma. In 1949, the school moved to Chicago, where it occupied one floor of a hangar at Midway Airport and featured dormitory rooms for the trainees, a laundry room, television and recreation rooms, a sun deck, and a cafeteria.

By the time Betty Leson, 82, began stewardess training in 1958, American had opened its state-of-the art training compound near the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, which was the airline’s hub at that point. Having already completed college with a degree in nursing, she was a few years older than many of the other girls she met during her training. “When I was growing up,” she said, “I would spend my summers in Nashville with an uncle and aunt that lived near the airport and I would ride my bicycle to the airport and sit there on the long canopy ... and watch those airplanes come in and all of

these beautiful girls get off. Everybody was dressed up in high heels and gloves and the women all had on hats, and it just looked like a glamorous thing to do.”

She had gone to nursing school in part to appease her mother. “I had always wanted to be stewardess and my mother was very insistent that I get educated before I do something frivolous.” Leson’s mother—a single parent—had instilled in her the importance of being able to support herself and not needing to depend on a man. Leson was shocked when she received the telegram telling her she had been accepted, having been intimidated by the sheer number of attractive women at her interview. “I guess I just didn’t have the confidence against those other beautiful girls,” she said. “I didn’t consider myself beautiful, and they were looking for the girl next door type.”

Lona Poehlmann, 79, was part of the second class to graduate from The Stewardess College. As a teen, she had travelled by passenger ship with her family on a 12-day journey to Germany, which inspired a lifelong love of travel. Realizing that she didn’t want to work in an office or be a teacher or nurse, Poehlmann traveled by train from her home in Chicago to California in order to participate in Santa Rosa Junior College’s meteorology and aeronautics programs. While she was there, a representative from American Airlines visited the campus to conduct stewardess interviews, and Poehlmann jumped at the chance. At that time, she recalled, women needed to be between 5’2” and 5’7” and “stick thin” in order to be considered.

Donna Tracey, 79, began stewardess training in 1959. She had been working as a customer service representative for the phone company when she saw an ad in the newspaper that Pan Am and American were both hiring stewardesses. “I was living at home with my parents in a suburb of Chicago,” she said. Her position with the phone



company was “an all right job but I wanted to get out on my own ... I wanted the independence, to live ... not alone but away from home. Just a job that had a little more interest to it, and travel.” The ad indicated that the airlines “were looking for girls who wanted adventure, travel.” Having left teaching college after one year, Tracey felt there were not a lot of career opportunities available to her. “I think there weren’t really that many opportunities. My job as a service rep was about the best I was going to find where I was.”

Intrigued by the possibility of an adventurous new job, Tracey took the train to Chicago, where she was interviewed by a man from American Airlines. He asked several questions, such as whether she would be willing to live in any city. In addition to answering questions, Tracey said, “you had to walk up and down for him, and basically that was it. He just said we’ll let you know.” A few weeks later, she received a letter indicating that she had been accepted, and instructing her to report to Chicago for a physical. “I know they had to weigh you and measure you because the requirements were you had to be at least 5’3” and less than 5’8”, and you had to weigh at least 105 pounds, less than 130.” Tracey was found to be just under the required minimum height at 5’ 2 1/2”, but the man giving the physical simply told her to “stand up tall.” She was also slightly underweight at 103 pounds. According to Tracey, “He said, ‘well, you’ll gain weight at stewardess school,’ which I did.” Within a month, she was off to begin her training.

MaryAnn “Casey” Cacioppo Bode, 70, felt a similar pull to the job when she applied in 1966. Having felt that her only options were to become a teacher or a secretary or a nurse, Bode had enrolled in a teaching college in her native Chicago. The oldest

child in a large Italian family, Cacioppo's parents had not gone to college, and she did not feel particularly encouraged to get a post-secondary degree. She was also not excited at the prospect of teaching. "It seemed like a progression that I was going to follow along with all of my other friends," she said. That changed when she saw an ad in the paper that Pan Am and American Airlines were hiring stewardesses. The idea "tickled my fancy, if you will," said Bode. "I had a vibe; this is me." When she arrived at the interview for American, the secretary looked her over and said, "You will not have a problem; good luck."

For Bode, the opportunity represented an escape from the life she had thought she was destined for. "To do something different, an always changing job, that's what appealed to me," she said. By then, she had realized that teaching was not for her. "Being in a school and teaching kids, the same kids, the same school ... this was so much more exciting ... at that age, 19, you always want to break away from your family and do your own thing, I think."

Known as The Stewardess College, the school all three women attended for their training was similar to a regular college campus, situated on 22 acres and complete with dormitories, classrooms, recreational facilities, and cabin simulators. The woman in charge of the college was R. Mildred "Millie" Alford, who started out as a stewardess and became "the top woman executive in American Airlines—and a leading woman in the airline industry" (Mahler 126). Under her direction, The Stewardess College established the lengthiest and most intensive stewardess training in the industry. "It was very strict," said Poehlmann. "If they said white was black, you didn't question it."

Over the course of five to six weeks, the stewardesses-in-training enjoyed a special camaraderie while learning and living together. Tracey, who had attended a boarding high school and then lived for one year at college, experienced a familiar feeling of togetherness, interacting with a large number of other women and following the same schedule of classes with them.

“It was a brand new building,” remembered Tracey. “They used to train at the different airports, like Chicago or New York. This was the first time they were having everyone in one place. A beautiful building, there were five of us to a room. They were built for four to a room but they had such a big class there were five to a room and we shared a bathroom with five girls on the other side.” For Tracey, it signaled the beginning of long-term friendships. “We were all new and we kind of stuck together,” she said. “Three of them ended up being my roommates in Boston.” Bode enjoyed a similar experience with her roommates. “There was an affinity among us that began then that has never been broken. We were definitely a club from the beginning.”

The trainees spent much of their time at The Stewardess College learning safety procedures of the planes they would be flying. At that time, this meant Convair 440s and DC-6s and DC-7s. According to Tracey, their education focused on “safety procedures, serving procedures, and lots of classes on make-up and hair.” Unlike Linda Terry’s experience, where the focus was on ability rather than appearance, stewardesses now had to be competent and service-oriented while also maintaining a consistent and clearly defined image. “My skin broke out for the first time,” said Tracey, “because they tried so many things on me and you had to wear a certain shade of red nail polish: Cherries in the Snow. Revlon’s Cherries in the Snow, lipstick and nail polish.”

The instructor in charge of the makeup classes, Kelly Flint, had been an actress previously. “She was very dramatic,” Tracey remembered. “A real task-master,” agreed Poehlmann. Tracey commented on another requirement for the young women: “You could not color your hair; it had to be natural color and they would try all these different things on you – and taught you how to walk: straight, one foot in front of the other, like models.”

Tracey’s graduation photo from The Stewardess College shows a starkly homogeneous group of 65 women lined up along the main staircase of the school, smiling radiantly. Each is wearing the standard uniform of the time: a crisp navy suit consisting of a knee-length skirt, buttoned jacket, and white blouse. Their newly earned silver wings pins adorn the left side of their suits. Some are blonde, some brunette, but they all sport the regulation above-the-collar length of hairstyle. Those standing on the floor at the bottom of the staircase have adopted the standard model’s pose of having one foot slightly in front of the other. All of them are young; all of them are pretty; all of them are white.

The emphasis on appearance caused a great deal of concern for students, but none ever questioned it. Women who may not have ever felt self-conscious about their looks were now worried that they might lose their place at The Stewardess College if any physical attributes did not measure up to standards. Most of the time, a woman who didn’t pass muster simply disappeared, sent home without the chance to say goodbye to her friends and roommates. The remaining students were left to wonder how the missing woman had failed, and to worry that they might be next. “I was scared to death to ask,” said Leson. “You lived in deep fear every day that you were going to get sent home in the

next 30 minutes.” Tracey had a similar experience. “Everybody was very stressed,” she said, “because some girls did get sent home for various things. You never really heard why but you were always afraid you would be the one that didn’t pass the test.”

Poehlmann echoed this sentiment, stating that sometimes she would go to class and there would be an empty desk because a classmate had been sent home, but the other women were never told why. “It made everyone nervous,” she said. “You did not want to be the next empty desk.”

One girl, Poehlmann said, was singled out for having too much hair on her arms. “They wanted her to get electrolysis.” The young woman refused, and ended up being sent home as a result. “There was a lot of superficial stuff that no one would get away with now,” she said. Bode recalled a classmate who was almost sent home because of skin problems. She was “having trouble with her skin and every night after class she sat there with a heat lamp on her face. I’ll never forget that because they were going to terminate her for acne.”

The only time Tracey and her classmates were aware of why someone was sent home was in the case of a young woman who was missing the first digit of one finger. “They told her that would not do,” said Tracey, “because you’d be serving people and can’t have that.” On the flight home to Arizona, the woman happened to sit next to a prominent politician from her state. Upon hearing her story, he intervened on her behalf, and she was back at The Stewardess College with the next incoming class.

In addition to the classes on hair and makeup, Tracey recalls that there was a strong focus on customer service. Students practiced memorizing names with mock groups of passengers. “We had to go around with a seating chart and write down people’s

names, where they were sitting, and you were expected to call them by name ... at least once during the trip and when you said goodbye to them,” she said. They also memorized the locations of all the states and the names of their capitals, as well as all the routes flown by the airline. “And we had classes on safety,” she said. They learned how to open the emergency exit doors and evacuate an airplane by way of the slides. “We went on an actual plane and we all had to take a turn opening the door and going down the slide.” Of course, most of these safety skills remained invisible during the stewardesses’ flying careers. While their appearances and attention to customer service were readily visible, their knowledge of emergency procedures was, fortunately, not often on display.

“You would think, what the heck are we studying?” said Bode. “How to make coffee? But there was more to that. It was emergency training, a lot of medical things, and then they would give these damned tests that you had to pass. Some women were really upset taking tests like you find in regular college.” By the time she was at The Stewardess College, the new 707 jets had been added to the American Airlines fleet, so she learned about emergency procedures for those in addition to the smaller propeller planes. She and her classmates were also trained in CPR and basic medical care: “how to resuscitate, how to see the signs when somebody was having problems, when somebody passes out on you. Even how to give birth to a baby on board.”

Tracey’s photographs of her friends and roommates from The Stewardess College in September 1959 could be of any college co-eds from that era living a typical life in the dorms. Clad in Bermuda shorts or pedal-pushers, sometimes with curlers in their hair, the young women are captured sunbathing by the pool, mugging for the camera, and enduring group study sessions together. A shot of Tracey and her four roommates depicts

them studying in their dorm room, grouped around a table scattered with candy, writing paper, and books, their ubiquitous cigarettes dangling from their fingers as they read and write. As with any other college, there was homework to do and exams to prepare for.

There was an 11 p.m. curfew, strictly enforced to ensure that the trainees did not stay out too late on dates. Although they were adults, they were closely supervised. Bode and her date once lost track of time, causing her to return after the gates were locked. She had to ask the couple who acted as caretakers to let her in. The next day was graduation, and Bode feared she would be kicked out for her transgression. “So they let me put on the uniform, let me go up on stage, and my supervisor came over to give me my wings, and before she did she reached over to hug me ... but she whispered in my ear, ‘If I ever catch your ass late on the line, you are toast. Congratulations.’”

Although they found the course to be rigorous and challenging at times, none of the women felt that the restrictions about appearance were oppressive or unreasonable. At that time, there was simply nothing shocking about being expected to be thin and pretty in order to fulfill their job functions. They all recall their time at The Stewardess College quite fondly, and all felt it had prepared them adequately for the jobs they were about to undertake. The president of American Airlines during those early years was C.R. Smith, who had a paternal fondness for the stewardesses, was beloved by them, and attended every graduation. “He called us his honeybuns,” said Bode. “I know that’s kind of derisive now and sexist, but we were his honeybuns. He looked after us.”

Upon graduation from The Stewardess College, the women received a certificate which read, in part, that they had

... completed the course of training required by the College, to the satisfaction of the Faculty and the Director. They have expressed their confidence that she will

capably perform the flight duties to be assigned to her, and that she will faithfully uphold the high standards and the traditions of her profession ... She is now entitled to wear her Stewardess Wings and is enrolled in the Stewardess Corps of American Airlines (Tracey scrapbook).

Now that the formal training portion of their careers was over, the newly minted stewardesses were ready to step out with pride wearing their crisp, new, navy blue uniforms, complete with the silver pins that signified that they had earned their wings. It was time for them to begin their flying careers under the watchful eyes of supervisors and passengers.



### Chapter 3: Everybody Stopped and Looked at You

In 1975, feminist film theorist and critic Laura Mulvey published her essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in *Screen*, introducing the world to the concept of the male gaze. While it was initially intended as a lens through which to view cinema, the idea of male as viewer/female as viewed was soon applied to other areas of feminist thought. The theory of male gaze is aptly fitting when examining the job of stewardess. As Mulvey explained in her essay,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact ... She holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire (Mulvey 19).

Mulvey’s theory was based, in part, on the Freudian idea about “scopophilia ... one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. [Freud] associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 17).

Despite the name, “male gaze” is not limited to men. Rather, it refers to the idea that both men *and* women have a tendency to view females through this lens, in which women represent a sexualized ideal determined by the dominant male culture. According to this theory, women look not just at other women through the male gaze, but also at themselves. Thus, the image of the perfect stewardess comprised male-defined exemplars of femininity: beautiful, nurturing, and sexy. However, these perceptions are complicated by the fact that stewardesses were studied in complexity: beautiful, and also smart; nurturing, and also independent; sexy, and also non-threatening to other women. They

managed simultaneously to embody the archetypes of mother, wife, daughter, and whore, to create something entirely new.

More than most professions available to women—other than movie star or model—stewardesses spent their days prominently on display and subject to the male gaze. Even their workplace, the airplane itself, represented an obvious phallic symbol that inextricably links them with sex. Their training at The Stewardess College had made one thing abundantly clear: from the moment they left their homes in their uniforms, they were responsible for representing the airlines. To do so in the most positive way possible meant maintaining an image of beauty and friendliness.

As Bode said, “The thing about smiling was a very big deal. You never walked in a terminal in your uniform without smiling. You didn’t know who you were smiling at, or what you were smiling about, but you had to have that smile on. How you looked was very, very important.” Lona Poehlmann added, “We used to refer to The Stewardess College as ‘smile school.’”

The smiles were crucial because the public was watching. “When you walked through the airport,” said Tracey, “everybody stopped and looked at you.” They were enough of a novelty at that time—and a beautiful one, at that—as to be worthy of not just gazes, but stares. Hence, the airline regulations about girdles, high heels, hats, and white gloves at all times. Like movie stars, stewardesses had an air of glamour about them; people enjoyed looking at them, and had high expectations about what they would see. Like movie stars, to be seen looking less than perfect in public could destroy a career, as could that most heinous of offenses—growing older. A stewardess without a

smile signified a woman who was distant, unfriendly, unwelcoming, and unwilling to serve.

As the stewardesses I interviewed all pointed out, the requirements about appearance did not strike them as particularly unusual, because they reflected the norm for women of that era. “That was pretty much what all girls were doing at the time,” said Tracey. “Putting your hair up in big rollers every night and sleeping on that and wearing make-up ... everybody was doing that ... [P]eople make a big thing about ‘oh, the stewardesses had to wear girdles,’ but a lot of women did anyway.” The difference, of course, was that for stewardesses, failing to adhere to these restrictions could lead to their dismissal and loss of livelihood.

While at The Stewardess College, women became acutely aware of how their new status attracted the male gaze. Leson, having been part of the very first class to attend The Stewardess College, pointed out, “We got lots of publicity.” She and her classmates were featured in a center spread in *Life* magazine, all arranged behind their instructor for the photo. The newly minted stewardesses also learned, indirectly, to turn that male gaze on themselves, internalizing the high standards of appearance that the job required and relishing the stares of strangers who viewed them as minor celebrities.

They also faced the reality that infractions regarding their appearances could result in expulsion. That trend continued once they began flying. Deviations from the accepted norms—disruptions to the male gaze—were not tolerated. “Your hair had to be cut a certain way,” Bode recalled. Her hair at the time followed the trend of the Sassoon-inspired bob. “One side I used to put behind my ear; they were always after me for that. It couldn’t be behind your ear ... No reason other than it didn’t look proper. So they were

very, very strict and we always had grooming checks, where when you came to the airport and signed in for a trip, your grooming was checked.”

Grooming checks, conducted by supervisors, consisted of making sure uniform skirts were the right length—not too short—and that stewardesses were wearing makeup, hat, gloves, and foundation garments. The high heels could be swapped out for “alternates”—lower-heeled shoes worn during flights—but in the airport, and when passengers were boarding and deplaning, they were a must. As Poehlmann pointed out, stewardesses’ mid-sections were at eye level for passengers when they were seated on the plane, and therefore girdles were expected. Bode recalled that women with smaller breasts who wouldn’t normally have worn a bra were required to do so. “They were always bitching about the bra they’d have to wear, and you couldn’t tell one way or another,” she said. “Sometimes they [supervisors] would feel a woman’s back to make sure.” Even in the late 1970s, she said, she flew with a stewardess who was asked if she was wearing a bra. When she said she was not, she was sent home.

During grooming checks, stewardesses were given the opportunity to rectify infractions. “We were told to apply [makeup], or to put a bra or a girdle on,” said Bode, “and if they checked you again and you didn’t have that, that would be grounds for termination after three times. You were given something called a C3-14,” a form that documented the violation and went into the stewardess’s record. “You didn’t ever want to receive one of those,” she added.

The relative ease with which airlines could reprimand or terminate stewardesses is especially glaring when compared with how rarely male pilots fell under scrutiny, even for much more grievous offenses. Tracey recalled that although there was a rule against

drinking alcohol within 24 hours before a flight (for both stewardesses and flight crews), many ignored this. One particular pilot she flew with on several occasions was known to be an alcoholic. “I was on a flight with him in Boston ... someone said they had gone to dinner with him and his face was in his plate because he had just passed out after dinner,” she said. Another pilot was known as “Killer Jack,” she said, “because he froze when it was time to land the plane and the flight attendant would knock his arms down and the first officer would land the plane.” Tracey asked a first officer why the other members of the flight crew covered for these men. He responded, “It’s the only job they know, they’re making really good money, and you don’t want to be the one ... You know you’re always there to cover, and you don’t want to be the one to ruin their life.” No such protection existed for stewardesses who failed to put on a girdle.

Once on the airplane, the stewardesses were constantly on display to passengers, and constantly subjected to the male gaze. All eyes were on them as they greeted passengers, made safety announcements and demonstrated emergency procedures, and served meals and drinks. The work itself could be rigorous. On “puddle-jumper” routes, planes made a series of short flights from one point to another. Tracey recalled working one route that travelled from Boston to Chicago with intermediate stops in Providence, Rochester, Syracuse, Buffalo, and Detroit. Leson worked one that flew from Dallas to New York with five stops in between. During each leg of the trip, the stewardesses had to quickly and charmingly serve coffee to all passengers, with an additional lunch service between Detroit and Chicago. Bode recalled that they were required to serve by delivering two trays of food at a time. There were no carts at the time, so stewardesses carried the food and cocktail trays to passengers. “We worked our tails off,” said Leson.

Unlike the flight crew (pilot, co-pilot, and navigator), who remained ensconced in the cockpit, the stewardesses' job performances and appearances were always under scrutiny. This often manifested itself in the form of passenger commendations. Comment cards were placed in every seat pocket, and passengers frequently used them to express how pleased they were with the service they received on flights.

Linda Terry has saved many of the commendations she received while flying in the 1940s, most of which focused on her customer service skills: "I never saw a girl so attentive, especially to the old ladies," read one. Another complimented her "attentions and outstanding and charming personality." One gentleman stated, "I would be delighted if I could have an autograph book of Capt. Douglas and crew of that wonderful trip, not forgetting that sweet stewardess."

Even when the comments specifically related to Terry's job performance, her gender and appearance are never completely out of the frame. One passenger wrote, "I was struck by the lavish attentions on the Clipper compared with my trip to N.Y. [on a different airline]. Their one little hostess was so worn and harassed. These lovely girls were smiling and charming. I do wish to comment on the delightful and lovely hostesses who worked together so smoothly and so efficiently. I was charmed with them." In all of these comments, the message is clear: the stewardess's job is not just to serve, but to charm, and to look good doing it. One of the most effusive commendations came from a woman named Gertrude King in 1951:

I have never seen as superb a stewardess as one of the girls on our plane...She was indefatigable, cheerful and always able to make each passenger feel that they were the chief object of her concern. She was also very beautiful, lithe and agile. I have watched countless stewardesses, Pullman car porters make up beds or berths but she did it as though it were all a dance...She has dark, straight hair tastefully

pulled back; wore ballet-type slippers; has, as all your stewardesses do, a trim figure (Terry scrapbook).

King, a female, employed the male gaze in her praise, being sure to address not just Terry's excellent work, but also to emphasize her dancer-like grace, thin figure, and beauty. Upon passing this along to Terry, her supervisor noted, "This is a fine commendation, Linda, but how about the ballet slippers?????????" Despite the rave review, the supervisor could only object to the fact that Terry had not fully satisfied the male gaze because she had failed to wear the regulation high-heeled shoes.

Similarly, stewardesses were also being watched, and judged, by flight check supervisors. These were women who boarded flights in order to report on the performance of the stewardesses. "They were called ghost riders," said Bode, and they were not known to the stewardesses, so they never knew which passengers might actually be supervisors filling out an observation report.

Not surprisingly, these reports documented not just the service and procedural components of the job, but also noted any shortcomings in terms of grooming. In fact, the very first section on the standard report form was, "Personal Appearance." One such report for Tracey said simply, "Hair too bouffant." A more positive review stated, "Your uniform appearance and personal grooming were very neat. You can certainly take pride in your standard of grooming." Another noted, "Appearance very neat and attractive." One provided constructive criticism about her skin: "Donna, you appear to be having a complexion problem—suggest that you watch your diet and control, though difficult, blemishes." The primary area of improvement supervisors suggested for Tracey was in using passengers' names more frequently, sitting with passengers during takeoffs and landings, and being more varied in her greetings of passengers. One report advised her

that passenger boarding was “an excellent time to display warmth and friendliness—and you have such a pretty smile. Use it, Donna, to the best advantage.” The best use of her smile, the report implied, was to make passengers feel good.

Stewardesses were also subjected to the male gaze from their closest colleagues: the flight crews with whom they spent much of their time. When Tracey was flying (from 1959-62), she found that most of the men she worked with were paternal in nature, treating the stewardesses as surrogate daughters to be protected. They were often World War II veterans who had been trained to fly during the war, and therefore were significantly older. Nevertheless, she said, there were “one or two guys” who would “tell jokes that weren’t really appropriate.” Leson put it more bluntly, saying, “Every once in a while you’d find a horny pilot who wanted to put the make on you, but we got used to that real soon, real quick.” It was understood by stewardesses that the onus was on them to “get used to” such behavior and to adapt their responses as necessary, given that the pilots were under no expectation of changing their own actions.

Bode agreed that her male co-workers often exploited the subservient role that stewardesses were relegated to. “When you went in the cockpit they always had to tell you a dirty joke,” she said, “or, ‘Come sit on my lap’ ... The captain especially, who you had to give respect to, I had some real difficulties with them. They used it.” She acknowledged that there was a fair amount of dating that occurred between stewardesses and flight crews. “There was a lot of sex, as I remember, especially on layovers ... They (flight crews) were having extramarital affairs with stewardesses often.”

In their personal lives as well, stewardesses were subject to the male gaze. Being a stewardess, said Bode, “meant that you were really the center of attention at a party. It



meant that you were respected and that people wanted to be around you. It meant that you were interesting, you participated in life, I think, in ways that people who stayed on the ground couldn't." To be sure, people were attracted by the stewardesses' stories of adventure, travel, and interactions with celebrities. However, Freud's "curious and controlling gaze" also came into play. Tracey acknowledges that a number of men asked her out when they learned what she did for a living. "Yes, that was like a status thing for them," she said. When she was based in Boston, living with three other stewardesses, "there was an apartment across the street that was all Harvard Law School and Business School guys who always invited us to their parties ... their whole thing was 'oh, there's going to be some stewardesses at the party' when they told their friends." Later, when she was dating the man she would later marry, [he] had a friend who wanted me to fix him up with a stewardess; it didn't matter who she was, just a stewardess." For him, as for many men, it was the image of the stewardess that was important, not the merits or attractions of the women as individuals.

"We had the reputation of being like a movie star," said Leson. When she and her classmates first arrived at The Stewardess College, officers at nearby Carswell Air Force Base sent a bus to pick all the trainees up and host them for an evening of entertainment. The Club Officer, who would later become Leson's husband, arranged for a champagne fountain and a live band. "It was just such a big deal and all these single officers were after all of us," she said. "All the guys wanted to entertain stewardesses, wanted to date the stewardesses."

A feature in *Life* magazine from the 1960s titled "Who Are the World's Best Wives?" attempted to answer the question of why so many men wanted to date

stewardesses, and were wise to do so. The piece argued that working as a stewardess provides women with the ultimate training in becoming the perfect wife. “During her 18 months aloft, the average hostess dishes up 7,700 meals, warms 1,250 baby bottles and walks a total of 300 miles up and down the aisle while sneaking sidelong glances at approximately 8,000 eligible bachelors,” it said. The job is a win-win situation, as women develop the skills and traits men are looking for, while essentially providing stewardesses the opportunity to “shop” for a suitable mate.

Bill Borden, manager of hostess training for TWA, is quoted in the essay as saying,

What we’ve been doing is to recruit brides for the nation’s bachelors. By the time a girl’s finished her six-week course and has been flying for a year, she’s a combination mother, teacher, nurse, confidante, comforter, cook, and companion. She knows when to talk, when to listen, how to entertain and be gracious. What more can a man want? (Tracey scrapbook)

Millie Alford, from American Airlines’ training center, concurred with this assessment. Courses taught at The Stewardess College, she said, “certainly help prepare a young lady for wifedom.” In addition to the classes on how to look good, she claimed that the stewardesses were also primed for marriage by learning when to stay quiet. “Our curriculum also specializes in conversation,” she stated. “I mean not only how to talk interestingly—but, even more important, how to recognize when a person *doesn’t want to talk*” (Tracey scrapbook). By teaching women to be subservient to the whims of men, the airlines catered to the male gaze and the fantasy of a submissive and willing woman.

“But most important of all,” Alford continued in the *Life* feature, “your airline stewardess is a thoughtful person, devoted to the idea of service. A girl who can serve

seventy meals in bumpy weather to seventy demanding personalities and then ask, ‘What can I do for you now?’ becomes the world’s most gracious hostess and an ideal wife.”

The male gaze was even at work during times of heroism and bravery. When Donna Tracey and her friend, roommate, and fellow stewardess Maggie Fleming experienced a plane crash, the news coverage of the incident reveled in focusing its lens on the two pretty young women.

On September 14, 1960, Tracey and Fleming were working aboard an American Airlines Electra with 70 passengers and four other crew members when, according to the pilot, a gust of wind pushed the plane down, causing it to hit a dike at end of the runway at LaGuardia Airport in New York City. The plane flipped over and skidded, upside-down, for over 500 feet, shearing off one wing.

Tracey and Fleming, seated in the rear lounge area, ended up hanging upside-down, held by their seat belts. They managed to unbelt themselves, slide down the walls of the plane, and push open the plane’s exit door located in the lounge. They calmly escorted passengers to safety, directing them to run in the opposite direction of the black smoke now pouring from the destroyed aircraft. The two stewardesses then went back on board to make sure no one else still on plane, which had by that time filled with smoke. All passengers were evacuated in less than 90 seconds, and although a handful of passengers received minor injuries, all escaped with their lives.

Tracey is modest about her actions on the day of the crash, downplaying its severity and giving credit to the fact that all passengers remained calm and quiet, making it easy for the stewardesses to help them. She minimizes the role that she and Fleming played, despite the fact that there was no blueprint for how to respond in such

circumstances. “We always said we were fortunate, because there are certain rules for every kind of accident, what you’re supposed to do, use this slide or this exit. There were no rules for landing upside down ... Who would think of that?”

Newspaper photos taken inside the airport just after the crash show Tracey and Fleming looking stunning, with their uniforms and caps looking fresh and their hair and makeup still flawless. Their ever-present smiles are dazzling.

Both women were lauded by media and the airlines for their heroism and professionalism. They received the Flight Safety Foundation’s Award of Merit, as well as the Distinguished Service Award for Valor from American Airlines. The airlines treated them to dinner at The Stork Club and a Broadway play, and also sent them on a week-long vacation to Bermuda. (The flight crew, meanwhile, was treated to an inquiry about the crash, with questions about their role in it, ultimately leading to a demotion and temporary suspension for the pilot.) An article in the Chicago Daily News noted, “William Kreig, director of flight personnel for American, said many passengers credited the two young stewardesses ... with saving their lives. ‘They did a magnificent job of keeping everyone calm and getting them out fast,’ he said” (Tracey scrapbook).

Despite the kudos being showered upon them, Tracey and Fleming were repeatedly referred to as “girls” (which was common at that time), with focus being brought back repeatedly to their appearance.

In its announcement about the crash, a Flight Safety Foundation newsletter heralded, “Thank Heaven for Little Girls.” In the article, a female passenger commented that the evacuation of the flight had been relatively easy, given that they were walking on the ceiling: “Just that nice, wide ceiling to walk on and those great girls showing us the

way” (Tracey scrapbook). Similarly, an American Airlines newsletter dated December 27, 1960 stated, “When the gentlemen who comprise American Airlines’ Distinguished Service Award Board next convene they will find it their pleasant duty for the first time to present the company’s top distinction to an all-girl cast” (Tracey scrapbook). The women’s achievement was not emphasized as much as the men’s pleasure.

*The New York Mirror* quoted police inspector James Knott’s admiration for the calm work done by Tracey and Fleming. “The safety belts saved all their lives. The stewardesses must have done a great job.” Later, the reporter notes that Fleming looked “as trim and unruffled as if nothing had happened” (Tracey scrapbook). *Newsweek* referred to her as “Maggie Fleming, a pert 24-year-old stewardess,” and an article about their vacation to Bermuda calls her a “pretty air hostess.” The *Charlotte Observer*’s headline stated, “2 Gals Calmly Lead 70 from Burning Airliner,” suggesting something inherently absurd about “gals” being capable of accomplishing such a feat. Another news article identifies the heroines as “blonde Maggie Fleming, 24, and brunette Donna Gilligan [Tracey]” (Tracey scrapbook).

A newspaper near Tracey’s hometown, *The Spectator*, billed as “Joliet’s Illustrated Newspaper,” spoke to her former supervisor at the phone company. The article referred to, “Miss Gilligan [Tracey], described as a sharp-looking brunette ‘who was poised and also a lady’” (Tracey scrapbook). The reporter felt it necessary to focus not just on Tracey’s deeds, but also on her femininity and beauty. The article also includes a quote from Tracey’s mother, who stated her daughter assured her, “Tell Dad that I didn’t so much as get a run in my stocking.” Tracey is adamant that neither she nor her mother ever said any such thing. The article also quoted her mother as saying that American

Airlines had purchased her a new wardrobe and makeup kit. Again, this was completely false, and Tracey's mother never made such a statement. They were details invented by the reporter to further reassure readers that Tracey was still satisfying the male gaze.

## Chapter 4: For the Most Part, They Were Just Nice Girls

Airlines, having long been aware of the power of stewardesses to attract and fascinate the public, joined with the burgeoning advertising industry in the 1950s and 60s to exploit this image. The idea was not new. When Linda Terry was flying in the 1940s, American Overseas Airlines often used her in photo opportunities for public relations purposes. While based in London, Terry was assigned to work with the airline's calendar photographer, who had her pose in uniform at tourist attractions such as Big Ben and Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum. Photo captions identified her as "Minneapolis girl" or "the young lady from Minneapolis."

She was featured in a number of human interest stories in local newspapers designed to highlight the appeal of air travel. These included pieces on a flight with the world's tallest man; delivering three dozen roses to actor Tyrone Power at the London premier of his new film; being photographed with Mickey Rooney; escorting an 88-year-old Irish woman off the plane in the United States; caring for a baby girl on her flight from a Dublin orphanage to live with her new American parents; flying with a nine-year-old boy who was returning to live with his father in Paris after being kidnapped by his mother; being photographed with winners of a Bermuda honeymoon trip; and delivering a prestigious award from the American Public Health Association to the United Kingdom. Another article pictured her with a tapestry she learned to weave while on layovers in Europe. "To the desk-ridden this may seem a waste of valuable travel time," the writer stated, "but to Linda foreign places are old hat."

All of these public relations pieces were carefully orchestrated to portray the glamour, adventure, and fun of flying. By positioning Terry with everyone from movie

stars to orphaned infants, the airlines communicated the message that air travel was thrilling and extravagant, but also accessible to members of the general public. It also demonstrated a canny understanding of the public's emerging perceptions about stewardesses by utilizing images of the young and beautiful stewardess and casting her in the role of everything from surrogate mother, to trusted confidante, independent career woman, devoted daughter figure, and dream date.

While airlines and passengers were already utilizing the male gaze in Terry's days as a stewardess—and decades before Laura Mulvey would put a name to the idea—the real heyday of stewardess-as-advertisement was yet to come. During the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, stewardesses—never pilots—became the face of airline advertising. Their youth and beauty were spotlighted in order to attract male passengers, while their friendliness and efficiency were mentioned to allay suspicions among other females. Advertising presented stewardesses for public consumption as everything from girl next door to sex kitten. An early advertisement for Pan American-Grace Airways features a petty, smiling, young stewardess bottle-feeding a contented baby, with the caption, “You can forget about the 2 a.m. bottle on your way to South America with the ‘World’s Friendliest Airline’” (Omelia & Waldock 37). This ad, and others like it, utilized the male gaze to attract female passengers and reassure them that the stewardesses were non-threatening “good girls” who could only enhance their flying experience by embodying maternal traits.

A Braniff International Airlines ad from the 1960s extols the virtues of its stewardesses: “She is a daughter to the middle aged; security to the confused; a friend to everyone who boards her plane; a heroine to little girls; a source of pride and joy to her



parents” (Stein 44-5). Rather than focus on the woman herself, the ad uses the male gaze to have us, as readers and viewers, look at the stewardess as she is assigned various roles that are significant because of her relationship to others. The ad goes on to say that the Braniff International stewardess

knows how to serve meals and beverages in a gracious manner, a little about aerodynamics, a lot about first aid, and even how to deliver a baby—just in case. She is a model in how to walk, talk, sit, stand, apply make-up properly, and style her hair. She is full of common sense about situations that might occur in flight and on the ground (Stein 48-51).

The ad might be describing a doll rather than a person. It is careful to note that she knows “a little” about the traditionally masculine field of aerodynamics (but not too much), while her real areas of expertise belong to the more feminine arena (babies, nurturing, and beauty).

As time went on, airlines began to focus their advertising more on the perceived sexuality of stewardesses. Much of this incorporated images of and references to their uniforms, which had increasingly become a focal point in their own right. No longer the utilitarian, military-inspired outfits of the 1950s and early 1960s, uniforms were often created by famous fashion designers such as Halston and Pucci. They ranged from the glamorous to the racy; Southwest Airlines famously incorporated hot pants into its uniforms in the 1970s, and mini-skirts and go-go boots became standard. TWA focused the male gaze on perceptions of other cultures when it introduced its “Foreign Accent” flights in the 1960s. These themed flights included music, food, and magazines from various national identities, “with hostesses to match” (Stein 93). Passengers could choose from Italian, featuring stewardesses in modified togas; French, where they wore gold

lamé mini-dresses; Olde English, offering up stewardesses dressed as “wenches”; and Manhattan Penthouse, with stewardesses in flowing silk hostess pajamas.

A 1968 American Airlines ad featured an attractive young stewardess lounging in a chair, chin propped in her hand, looking seductively at the camera. She is wearing a white uniform and blue cape reminiscent of what a nurse might wear, perhaps to combine the suggestions of sexuality and care-giving. To further confuse the message, the tagline for the ad is, “Think of her as your mother” (Omelia & Waldock 97).

Another Braniff ad features what it calls “the Air Strip,” which depicts a stewardess changing and shedding layers of her Pucci-designed uniform to go from coat, boots, gloves and—bizarrely—a plastic rain helmet, to skirt and jacket, to dress, to top with culottes. Although the only skin the stewardess shows is from the knee down, the message is overt: she pouts, smiles, and throws her head back, flinging clothing items aside like a stripper, there for the pleasure of the males enjoying the show.

National Airlines took the sexual innuendos to a whole new level with their alarmingly un-subtle “I’m Laura; Fly Me” ad campaign. In addition to print ads, the airlines created television ads that featured beautiful stewardesses introducing themselves (“I’m \_\_\_\_\_”), mentioning a feature of their flights, and then coyly inviting, “Fly me.” Replace “fly” with another f-word, and you’ve got a blatant sexual come-on standing in as advertising. In case the message was not blatant enough, one of the print ads introduces Pat, who states, “I’m going to fly you like you’ve never been flown before” (Stein 94-5).

The reputation of stewardesses being promiscuous existed even earlier, while Tracey was flying in the late 1950s and early 1960s. “There was always that,” she said.

“They’re party girls, and they’re easy,’ and there were some,” Tracey admitted, “who were.” While Tracey and her peers were aware of the popular representations of sexy stewardesses, there was a disconnect between that awareness and what they actually experienced. “It was kind of new,” she said, but “we knew what we really were like. I mean, you knew there were some that were drinkers and some that slept around, but for the most part they were just nice girls.” The reality for stewardesses was far less salacious than what was presented in popular culture representations.

At the same time airlines were amping up the sexual nature of their ads, references to stewardesses were showing up in popular culture through movies and television, frequently depicting them as sexually liberated and promiscuous. A symbiotic relationship developed between these representations and society’s perceptions of stewardesses. Lona Poehlmann, who had become a stewardess in 1958, was mortified when her parents went to the 1969 film *The Stewardesses*, an X-rated movie about a group of young women who experience a night of drug-infused sexual exploits. Although they were generally supportive of her career choice, Poehlmann’s parents had expressed some concern because of the perception of stewardesses as easy. Seeing this particular movie only served to validate their fears.

Similar films soon followed, all following the same basic premise of lusty stewardesses enjoying sexual adventures in exotic locations. Titles included 1971’s *Stewardesses Report*, 1974’s *The Naughty Stewardesses*, 1975’s *Blazing Stewardesses*, and 1986’s *Stewardess School*. Some incorporate elements of humor or horror, but sex is the constant common denominator. These movies represent the logical extension of the

male gaze by expanding on sexual fantasies about beautiful, independent, adventurous young women whose identities are crafted from their willingness to serve and please.

Stewardesses were working harder than ever, and they were increasingly expected to do so while wearing skimpy, impractical uniforms and dodging the advances of male passengers. In Leson's opinion, part of the problem was the changing demographics of airline passengers. Whereas once stewardesses had catered to "the upper crust," bigger planes and increasingly lower airfares meant that air travel became more accessible and "we started getting the caliber of men on the flights that normally would be riding a Greyhound bus." The male gaze became more overt, and the expectations of promiscuity among stewardesses became the norm.

For Bode, the dictates about appearance at first presented no problem. "I was just like Miss Priss and Miss Perfect then," she said. "I wasn't going to do anything they didn't want me to do ... But that was my idol of a stewardess. That's how she was supposed to look and dress and act. So it fit me to a T, a perfect job for me." Having accepted the male gaze as her lens, she was perfectly content to conform to the expectations of the job.

Later, this presented challenges that threatened Bode's physical and emotional health and forced her to confront her own changing views about male gaze and her role in perpetuating it. At five feet, five inches tall, the maximum weight allowable for her by the airlines was 120 pounds. At one time, she developed an eating disorder and weighed 160 pounds, remaining at that weight for about a year. "Wearing my uniform was problematic," said Bode, "because I still had a size eight ... and I remember avoiding supervisors so I wouldn't have to get weight-checked." In addition to struggling with her

weight and unhealthy eating habits, Bode was saddled with the knowledge that she had to keep her problem secret, or risk losing her job. “When I look back on it,” she said, “it could be the image that I was trying to avoid, and I had got tired of a thin image, of being out there as sexual.” It took intensive therapy for Bode to understand the extent to which she had internalized the male gaze and the damage it had caused her emotionally.

She recalled that many stewardesses were fearful of being caught with a weight problem. “Oh yeah,” she said, “they were terrified.” A fellow stewardess, named Nell, was forced to take a ground job with the airlines because of her weight, despite her excellent performance as a stewardess. “If you were on a flight with Nell and she was your stewardess” said Bode, “you would have had a wonderful flight ... I always thought of Nell as being big, but her heart and her smile and her disposition always hid that for me. But you know, she had to toe the line.” As far as the airline was concerned, Nell’s excellent customer service was secondary to the need to maintain her trim figure. “They wanted good looking girls on those airplanes to entice these men to fly,” said Leson. “Sexist ... But what did we know about that in those days? Did we care? We didn’t even know what the word meant.”

Bode was not alone in becoming tired of the image. Even as the job of stewardess continued to increase in popularity into the 1960s, American culture was changing. The sexual revolution was in full swing, and suddenly the intrepid career women of the skies became sex symbols. Their portrayals in popular culture increasingly focused on their sexuality and appearance, and public assumptions shifted towards their presumed promiscuity rather than their safety and service capabilities. At the same time, the

expectations and challenges of the job were coming into stark contrast with the realities highlighted by the Civil Rights and Women's Rights movements.

## Chapter 5: As Long as They Don't Stop Me, I'm Going to Keep Flying

The 1960s and 70s saw enormous social change and political activism in the United States, especially in the areas of civil rights and women's rights. People began to question leadership at all levels, from protesting the Vietnam War to fighting against oppressive and outdated employment restrictions. These movements directly influenced and involved airline stewardesses.

The Civil Rights Movement, and specifically the Civil Rights Act of 1964, were instrumental in effecting a change in mindset for stewardesses. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act addressed discrimination in the workplace. Nurse and scholar Roberta Lessor pointed out that this section "is intended to remedy discrimination not only by race and sex but on such issues as age and child-bearing as well" (40). For years, stewardesses had simply accepted the airlines' rules that they had to retire when they turned 32 or got married. They could continue working for the airlines in a ground job (such as ticketing), but they could no longer be stewardesses. Those who did get married either quit voluntarily or kept their marriages a secret. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and with the support of stewardess unions and a new social consciousness, women began to actively challenge these restrictions.

Terry left her job as a stewardess when she got married in 1952. "I didn't like to quit, but it was part of the game," she said. She missed the job after leaving, but had kids and felt she couldn't leave them. "I would like to fly even now, but I can't," she added.

Leson had the same expectation. "I expected I would get married," she said. "In fact that was probably the motivation for most of the young girls at that particular time ... the only people who were able to fly, financially, were the top executives. So it was

certainly a good way to get a professional husband ... or a rich husband.” She did, in fact, leave the job when she became engaged. At the time, it did not occur to her to question the requirement that she retire at that point. “That’s the way it was,” she said. “You want to work for this company, you want to be a stewardess, this is what you do.” Poehlmann said that when she began flying in 1958, the average working time for a stewardess was two years, and that proved to be the case for her. She lasted almost exactly two years before she got married and left the job. “I felt the need to be honest about it,” she said. She transferred to a ground job with the airlines, and while she was disappointed not to be a stewardess any longer, she accepted it. “That’s just how it was.”

Tracey remembered that American Airlines had a retirement plan, “but they used to say for you it’s more like a dowry because you’re not going to be here long enough; we’ll just return it to you when you leave.” When she got married in 1962, there were no ground jobs available with the airline, so she would have been without a job. “We just got married very quietly,” she said, “and didn’t tell them.” However, Tracey’s supervisor heard a rumor about the marriage, and called her into the office to confront her about it. Tracey denied it, and was able to keep her job. “I just thought as long as they don’t stop me, I’m going to keep flying,” she said. She ended up quitting the following year when she became pregnant with her first child. She kept the pregnancy a secret at first, too, but finally quit because she was experiencing morning sickness on flights and, perhaps more importantly, could no longer button her uniform jacket.

With the passage of the Civil Rights Act, stewardesses became indignant about the fact that male pursers who worked on international flights were not required to retire



at age 32 and were allowed to be married. Some of them appealed to their unions and began to mount legal challenges against the airlines.

The onus was on the airlines as employers to prove that the discrimination is based on the fact that the job “*cannot* be performed by someone of the opposite sex or, as in the case of flight attendants, someone older than thirty-two” (Lessor 40). Airlines did, in fact, try to make this argument, stating that being young and female were necessary qualifications for the job “because passengers preferred young attractive women” (Lessor 40). As Lessor pointed out, “Every man that got on that airplane in the early days knew that every stewardess was single, except those that were married and kept it a secret.”

The courts found these arguments to be lacking, pointing out that there was no evidence to support the assertion, and that even if there was, it had no bearing on the stewardesses’ abilities to do their jobs. As a result, by 1968 most airlines had done away with restrictive age discrimination policies and reinstated stewardesses who had been forced to retire. According to Lessor, “only one hundred women returned to work in 1968. But their presence was highly symbolic and meaningful” (41).

In 1967, a Delta stewardess named Eulalie De Blois Cooper got married in secret, keeping the information from her employer to avoid losing her job. They did find out several months later and fired her when she refused to resign voluntarily. She was then denied unemployment benefits on the basis that she had “voluntarily” left her job. The argument was that by marrying, with the knowledge that it would result in termination, she was volunteering to leave the job. Cooper fought the decision, appealing it to the Louisiana Supreme Court. Her case, among others, brought national attention to an issue

faced by many stewardess and helped persuade all major airlines—including Delta—to rescind their rules against marriage.

Stewardesses who had been forced to leave their jobs when they turned 32, or when they married, suddenly had legal recourse to rebel against these restrictions, and the new awareness that retirement or marriage were not their only options. For many, it signaled the opportunity to think of their job as more than just a pathway to marriage, but rather to be an actual long-term career.

For Bode, who was based in San Francisco in the late 1960s and early 70s, the political climate of the time impacted her perceptions of her job:

I was right there in San Francisco, basically close to the Haight, so I was right there in the middle. My husband, who I married in '68 was a highway patrolman and he was called over to the Berkeley campus to beat heads during the Vietnam disturbance. It was really a disturbing time and there were a lot of political discussions on the airplane ... Just a controversial, explosive time.

When Bode started flying in 1966, the Civil Rights Act had already been passed, but it took three years of legal challenges and court hearings before it fully took effect. Even at that time, she said, “I figured that I’d probably work for a couple of years and meet somebody, get married, and be a housewife.” In 1968, she married her first husband, but never quit the job. “Seniority was everything with the job,” she pointed out. “The flights got better, my life got easier, my pay scale went up and I really liked it, and what a deal compared to some of my friends who were going to work every day.” Influenced by the political discussions, protests, and general environment of San Francisco in the 1960s, she was empowered to start valuing her career—and herself—as worthy in their own rights. “Living in the Bay Area during those times you had to be affected,” she said. “You really had to be as a woman.” Because she married once the age

discrimination challenges had been settled, she never had to lie about it to the airlines, and never had to make the choice between her career and her marriage.

The other major influence on stewardesses in the 1960s and 70s was the Women's Movement. Lessor pointed out, "Under the aegis of the Women's Movement, flight attendants attempted to remove the subservient woman's image and to create a positive image of their work" (41). They rebelled against the male gaze by bringing attention to the hard work they did and challenging the socially-accepted idea that they were merely sex objects. "We garnered our own strength and our tongue to be able to say no, that wasn't right," said Bode.

An organization called Stewardesses for Women's Rights, comprised of women from various airlines, was established in 1973 to change the narrative in an organized, consistent manner. They highlighted the gravity of their profession by airing messages such as, "A stewardess is someone who can open the door of a 747 upside down underwater" (Lessor 42).

Stewardesses also embraced the idea, articulated by the Women's Movement, that it was possible for them to have a career and a family simultaneously. Bode recalled, "I found out that some of my friends all through the time where you couldn't be married and couldn't have children" did, in fact, have families and had to keep their personal lives a secret for fear of losing their jobs. One woman Bode graduated with later revealed to her that "she had a son, she had married and had a son ... She was hiding him the whole time." This woman's story highlights that having a career as a stewardess and a family, and juggling the competing demands of both realms, was entirely possible. It is also a truly sad commentary on the state of employer expectations at that time to realize that she

could not share her personal happiness with friends at work. As Lessor pointed out, “For the married woman, it was still considered illegitimate to like to work, and doubly illegitimate to like to work at great distances from home” (44). The Women’s Movement helped to disrupt this mentality and validate the choices of women who wanted to have both.

A pivotal moment for Bode occurred when one of her role models, Gloria Steinem, was a passenger on one of her flights. It was a quiet night flight, giving all the stewardesses the opportunity to sit with Steinem and chat with her. “She was amazing,” said Bode, and the conversation was an inspiration to her:

She wanted to know how we thought. She asked us many questions ... and told us how important the women’s movement was, that we all were together ... her main thing to me was all professions, female, we have to stay together because we all have the same problems, although they’re different, and if we’re not united we’re not achieving anything.

While she had experienced many instances of men making sexual innuendos and advances because she was wearing a stewardess uniform, Bode said it wasn’t until her conversation with Steinem that she really reflected on what this meant. “I became aware that I happened to be in a career that really perpetuated sex in the form of a job, in the form of being a stewardess,” she said. She had not felt that way during her earlier days on the job, “but I was aware of that as feminism came into play.”

Another consequence of the Civil Rights Act and its success in eliminating gender discrimination in the workplace was that, for the first time, men began taking jobs as air stewards, and the job title eventually changed to the gender-neutral “flight attendant” that we know today. According to Leson, this change was not universally welcomed initially. “On the whole,” she said, “the stewardesses did not want men. It was taking away the

glamour girl type of feeling ... This was our thing, we didn't want to share it with guys.” By 1973, “one-fifth of the flight attendants graduating in the U.S. were men” (Omelia & Waldock 116). The males wore uniforms that hearkened back to the earlier days of military-inspired outfits, and soon the women's uniforms underwent a transformation, as well. Gradually, hot pants and mini-skirts were replaced with more professional-looking attire.

The inclusion of males also signaled a revolution in airlines' strict regulations about weight limits for women. Men still had to maintain a certain weight, but they were allowed to adhere to the guidelines for men of “large frame,” whereas women were held to a stricter standard. As late as 1984, 117 Pan Am Stewardesses who had been fired, suspended, or denied promotion based on their weight filed suit against the airline (Off Our Backs). The case settled out of court, with the airline denying discrimination but agreeing to pay the women \$2.35 million, reinstate their jobs, and allow them a slightly heavier weight.

The conflation of the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and the experiences of thousands of stewardesses who had been subject to the male gaze for decades created a perfect environment for radical change. In the case of flight attendants, that change came slowly but surely, resulting in more equitable employment practices and decimation of the sexism that had flourished for so long in the airline industry. Modern flight attendants owe a huge debt of gratitude to the women who came before them. The same independent, slightly rebellious streak that prompted so many of those women to take to the skies in the first place helped usher in a new era of diversity and acceptance in the workplace.

## Conclusion

The women interviewed here have mixed feelings about the changing standards for flight attendants. They embrace the inclusion of men, the elimination of mandated age-based and marriage-based retirement, and the decreased emphasis on weight and superficial appearance. They celebrate the eradication of girdles and white gloves.

However, they also miss the focus once given to customer service and personal interaction, and yearn for the golden age of flying when passengers were treated like valued guests. They also feel nostalgic for the time when flight attendants took more pride in their appearances, believing that airlines have moved to another extreme and become overly lax regarding what constitutes allowable workplace behavior and dress. The uniform that had attracted so many early stewardesses to the job in the first place is no longer a source of honor, and they bemoan the sometimes “sloppy” and slapdash look of unbuttoned jackets and poorly tailored skirts.

Tracey remembers her time as a stewardess fondly, but is satisfied with her decision to leave the job when she did. She has no regrets about the fact that she never returned to the job. “I couldn’t imagine keeping up an airline schedule when you had a family,” she said.

Bode continued flying until 2003. In 1985, American Airlines began offering international flights, she jumped at the chance to work those routes. “From 1985 until I retired in 2003, I commuted into Chicago from San Francisco to do exactly that,” she said. “It was well worth it.” By the time of her retirement, Bode had been a stewardess for over 37 years. She recalled with a laugh that her father never stopped asking her, “Honey, when are you going to settle down and get a real job?”

Poehlmann, who had retired upon marrying, went back to American as a stewardess in 1990 when she was 52 years old. Like Bode, she had always wanted to fly international routes and jumped at the chance to do so. She had to be retrained for the job, and found herself back at The Stewardess College 32 years after she had originally graduated. She was based in New York City, and would fly there from her home in California to report for work. Her husband would jokingly ask her, “When are you quitting?” Her response was always, “Never!” She eventually retired at the age of 65. She did not have quite enough seniority at that time to arrange for a schedule where she could work just a couple flights each month. If she had, she said, “I would have continued forever.”

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