

A bird's eye VIEW

By Rachael Reynolds, Assistant Accent editor

Flight attendants wind beneath travelers' wings

In the early days of commercial aviation, flying wasn't the most pleasant experience. Planes flew low so a typical flight felt like you were driving over boulders even though you were hovering 10,000 feet in the air. Stewardesses had the job of reassuring passengers, offering them chewing gum, striking up conversations, or complimenting them on their bravado, hoping they'd come back and fly again.

Stewardesses also were expected to help if things went awry, and some found themselves pulling frantic passengers from burning airplanes, earning them recognition of being warrioes in the sky.

Flight attendants still are considered that way to many, coming face to face with terrorists, delivering babies in-flight, and saving passengers' lives with the click of a defibrillator. Flight attendant Hermia Montardier shocked the world when she discovered the alleged shoe bomber on American Airlines Flight 63 in December, 2001.

Flight attendants have held many roles in their 70-year history, from nurturer to waitress-slash-bar tender, from sex object to airborne hero, from air rage victim to purveyor of safety. In the beginning, little girls aspired to be either an actress, a model, or a stewardess. Girls could play with paper stewardess dolls, dreaming of taking to the sky.

The profession has intrigued many flyers as a symbol of freedom and modern culture, be it good or bad. Several stewardesses have responded by publishing any number of tell-all books, dishes about harassment, rotten treatment, and those terrible weight checks. They include *Coffee, Tea or Me?* The Unsubstituted Memoirs of Two Airline Stewardesses (Penguin USA), *Plane Insanity: A Flight Attendant's Tales of Sex, Rage, and Quixotism* at 36,000 Feet (Griffin Trade Paperback), or *Around the World in a Bad Mood: Confessions of a Flight Attendant* (Chelsea).

Come Fly With Us! (Collectors Press, \$34.99) is the latest to hit the shelves. In it, authors Johanna Omelia and Michael Waldo have laid out the fascinating history of the airline hostess.

Registered nurse Ellen Church became the first flight attendant.



Photos: Come Fly With Us

AMERICAN AIRLINES was the source of this photo that shows a stewardess with newspapers she hands out to travelers.

When she was hired on May 15, 1930 by Boeing Air Transport. Early stewardesses were hired for \$125 a month to convince the public that airplanes were safe. Back then, stewardesses were asked not only to tend to passenger's needs, but to load baggage, freshen up the plane's exterior paint job, and tighten up loose chairs, that they never left home without packing their wrench.

Commercial air travel was a novel idea, and these serviceable, appealing, smartly-dressed young nurses helped glamorize the new mode of transportation. Soon, they became harbingers of style and sophistication, and the profession of flight attendant became an enviable achievement.

"It was always a very glamorous job," said Omelia in a telephone interview.

It wasn't easy to get such a posh gig, though. Stewardesses had to look and act the part, and airlines set strict standards. These Fly Girls, as they became known, had to be between 5' and 5'4" tall (mainly because planes were short and narrow), weigh under 120 pounds (and maintain it, subject to frequent checks), be between 20 and 25 years old, and unwed with no dependents. They also had to have pearly white teeth, porcelain skin, and healthy, shiny hair. All this — and be willing to retire at 30.

World War II created a huge demand for stewardesses as many were released to the war effort. Nursing qualifications were lifted in efforts to boost hirings, while height and weight requirements remained grounded.

Most stewardesses didn't mind, though, Omelia said. They got to travel the world, shopping in Italy, dining in Paris, and sunning in Hawaii. Such an extravagant gig led them to become even more admired, and by the 1950s they were seen as pop culture icons, used in advertisements to sell everything from cigarettes to bobby pins. Men, in particular, loved the friendly, high-beamed women and saw them as the "perfect little wife," able to mix a martini in one hand while warming a bottle in the other.

By the 1960s, flight attendants were being used as prime marketing tools to lure a growing number of passengers — particularly male

business passengers — to the sky. They became the face of the airlines, dressed in sleek uniforms and sporting sexy, cropped haircuts to mimic the free-spirited, independent new attitudes in the sexual revolution. Needless to say, most male passengers went gaga over flight attendants dressed in hot pants and go-go boots. Other airlines reached out to popular designers like Paco to design psychedelic outfits to make their Sky Girls stand out.

The concept took off and airlines put out advertisements that reeked of sexual innuendoes. Qantas ran an ad picturing four stewardesses dressed like beauty queens, each clad in a bathing suit and wearing a sash — this considered tame compared to other techniques.

In 1963, Air Bransiff launched the Air Strip, titillating male passengers by taking off a piece of clothing at each city until they got down to culottes. TWA began "Foreign Accent" flights, trying to realize its flyers' fantasies by offering a choice between an Italian stewardess in a toga, a French one in a gold mini, an English "wench" or a Manhattan penthouse girl in pajamas.

BOAC stewardesses were paper dresses and were given a pair of scissors to trim them shorter and shorter as they hurtled closer to Bermuda. TWA also tried paper dresses, but flight attendants complained of male passengers burning holes in their outfits with their cigarettes as jokes.

Today, such harassment wouldn't be tolerated, thanks to years of fighting for equality. It wasn't until the 1970s that weight and marriage restrictions were lifted, and airlines were forced by the courts to hire males to do the job. Also in time, pants replaced skirt skirts.

Ellen Church might roll over in her grave if she knew how much the profession has changed. The days of knowing how to tighten up a loose bolt have been replaced with knowing how to handle an enraged passenger or spot a suspicious person. They still have to know CPR, but also self-defense. Many don't even have to serve meals these days. As air travel evolves, the job continues to change, too. Waldo says. Airbus plans to debut the A380 in 2006 which will carry up to 900 people and feature dining bars, sleepers, and work stations, launching flight attendants into a whole new generation.

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL AIRLINES adopted the military look for its air hostesses. This picture is from *Come Fly With Us*, courtesy of ANA.



United Airlines Archive

A UNITED AIRLINES attendant fastens her wings. Picture from "Come Fly With Us" by Johanna Omelia and Michael Waldo.