

Flying Above The Glass Ceiling

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"Initially there was an unspoken bias at airlines for hiring women," explains **Capt. Karen Kahn**, who has been flying commercially since 1977, most notably for Continental Airlines, where she's been a captain for 22 years. When she began flying 727s at Continental, she was just the 26th woman hired by a major airline.



On the surface, the percentage of women pilots has remained relatively consistent for the past decade. Just over 6% of all pilots are female, including commercial, recreational, sports fliers or students, according to Women in Aviation, a networking and professional support group for women employed in the aviation industry.

But there are subtle shifts, most notably that women have moved out of the era of "firsts"--as in, first U.S. female licensed pilot (Harriet Quimby in 1911), first female captain of a major U.S. airline (Emily Howell Warner in 1976) or first woman to fly around the world in a helicopter (Jennifer Murray in 1997). Women are flying now not to set records but for passion, adventure and, importantly, career.

One believer in piloting as a growing professional field and hobby for women is John Bingham, CMO of Piaggio Aero Industries, one of the world's oldest airline manufacturers. "There are two things happening: The commercial aviation industry has opened up to allow and fully embrace women into its somewhat male bastion and more and more women are looking for adventurous hobbies and activities that enable them to do interesting things," says Bingham. And, he notes, there's ample opportunity for advancement.

If there's a way to describe the training and promotion regime, it's military. Train for at least 40 hours and you're eligible for a Private Pilot's License (PPL). Fifty more hours as pilot in command? You're in line for an instrument rating. A commercial license comes after a total of 250 hours in the air.

Kahn stresses the efficiency of the seniority system. Like everyone else, she started as a third pilot or flight engineer, maintaining fuel systems and cabin temperature before moving up to the co-pilot chair and, ultimately, an upgrade to commanding pilot.

"Once your number comes up in terms of seniority, you are eligible to apply for and test into the next available position," says **Kahn**. An added bonus: In FAA files, candidates for testing and positions are listed only by first initial and last name, making gender bias tricky, if not impossible.

Kristen Resetar, 30, lives in Medford, N.J., a Philadelphia suburb. As a pharmaceutical sales rep, her work calls for frequent travel. Not a problem--except that Resetar has aerophobia, or a severe fear of flying. After trying various forms of self-medication, including red wine and Vicodin, Resetar was determined to overcome her fear by any means necessary, including learning to fly.

"I thought to myself, if you learn more about how it actually works, you'll feel more comfortable in the air and be less convinced the plane is going to drop right out of the sky," says Resetar. "So I jumped right in." After a year of flight time, Resetar is one flight away from her check ride with the FAA for her PPL.

For Resetar, who is six months pregnant with her first child, overcoming her fear has become a way of life. "It's the hardest thing I've ever done," she says, "but by far the most rewarding. I have an incredible sense of accomplishment that I haven't felt from anything I've done before, from marathons to my education and work."

Resetar also mentions her colleagues who initially doubted her: "I feel a whole new level of respect from colleagues and customers who knew this was something I was going to achieve. And that respect carries into every aspect of my life."

Many organizations and advocacy groups have helped to pave the runway for women interested in pursuing aviation as recreation or career. Chief among them is The Ninety Nines, founded in 1929 by Amelia Earhart. What began as a sorority of female aviators is now the best-known organization for women pilots, with over 5,000 members in 36 countries.

Christine Shumway Mortine, 49, a conductor and concert soprano, has dreamed of flying since she was a little girl. A serendipitous move to Anchorage, Alaska--the float plane capital of the world--in her 20s gave her the inspiration to pursue her lifelong passion, albeit some 20 years later. "I made it my business to get to know every pilot I came across [in Alaska]," she says, "And to find out everything there was to know about flying before I even left the ground."

Back in her native Ohio, Shumway Mortine took her first flight in 2006. She's been booking flight hours and training, most recently to become a certified flight instructor. "The thing about aviation for me is it's the marriage of science, adventure and problem-solving," she says. "Being absolutely aware of the vulnerability that surrounds you when you're up in the air is what makes it so thrilling; you must know and take every precaution. It's easy to get complacent on the ground."

But thrill-seeking isn't the only reason Shumway Mortine loves to fly. It's also about taking care of people. She flies for Angel Flight, a nonprofit that connects patients in need of transport with pilots who can get them to doctors in different cities.

Shumway Mortine's wings come in handy for her family too. Her oldest daughter was interested in joining the Peace Corps in Africa, and having done volunteer work herself in Rwanda, Shumway Mortine knew just how dangerous it could get. "I told my daughter that one of the reasons I'm flying is in case she ever needed to be rescued," she says. "I was half-joking at the time, because I could never fly the small planes I fly across the ocean, but I saw the look in my kid's eyes. For my kids to know that not only *would* I rescue them, but that I *could*, is the most amazing feeling in the world."

For all the reasons women fly--as an occupation, as a self-confidence booster or to help others--these women pilots share a common passion for being up in the air. They acknowledge being in the minority, but don't see it as much of a hindrance. In fact, each admits that sometimes being the sole woman in the air can work to her advantage. Being the only female voice on the radio when calling into air traffic control has its perks, says Shumway Mortine. "I get a lot of 'Have a nice day, Ma'am!'"