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# Generations of female pilots face hurdles

## Ninety-Nines encourage women to join industry

Marijane Sipple, a retired commercial pilot, suggested weeks ago that I write a column about the local chapter of the Ninety-Nines, an international organization of licensed women pilots.

She explained that the organization was founded in 1929 by Amelia Earhart. When 99 licensed pilots accepted an invitation to become charter members, they became known as the Ninety-Nines — a name that remains today for an organization that has nearly 8,000 members in 153 chapters around the world, including the 65 in the Florida First Coast chapter.

While there have been many breakthroughs for women in aviation in the last 95 years, women still represent a fraction of pilots in America — about 7 percent of airline pilots — and still face some lingering hurdles and stereotypes.

Sipple suggested I come to an event at Cypress Village that would feature a few of the local Ninety-Nines — including Laurie Reeves, a retired United Airlines pilot who was a pioneer in airline aviation and is a mentor for younger members.

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**Capt. Rebecca Lobach and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Sabrina Bell smile in the cockpit of a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter. It was the model of helicopter Lobach was flying in during crash over the Potomac River on Jan. 29. PROVIDED BY SAMANTHA BROWN**

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I did go to that event and already was planning to write something.

Then current events made the Ninety-Nines feel even more pertinent.

## 'Nothing was just handed to her'

After an Army helicopter collided with American Airlines Flight 5342, sending both aircraft spiraling into the Potomac River, some (including the president) said it was the result of DEI initiatives in aviation. And some noted that one of the pilots in the Black Hawk helicopter, Capt. Rebecca Lobach, was a woman — and questioned whether she deserved to be there.

That led to Capt. Lobach's family issuing a statement that, after describing her as "kind, generous, funny, ambitious and strong," basically defended her qualifications. It noted that she began her career in the Army as a "distinguished military graduate in ROTC at the University of North Carolina, and was in the top 20 percent of cadets nationwide," achieved the rank of captain, and with more than 450 hours of flight time, earned certification as a pilot-in-command after extensive testing by the most senior and experienced pilots in her battalion.

Capt. Bilal Kordab, who recruited Lobach to the North Carolina National Guard, told USA Today: "Not only did she deserve what she achieved, but she was overqualified most of the time for what she was able to accomplish. Nothing was just handed to her."

## A long history of women in flight

Back to a couple of weeks earlier and the local Ninety-Nines. This was a recurring thread in their timeline of women in aviation. Nothing was handed to them.

Often, the opposite was true.

Cheri Parsons, who was a Navy pilot, introduced a video that detailed the origins of the Ninety-Nines. It describes how in the summer of 1929, 20 female pilots competed in a transcontinental air race from California to Cleveland. In a time long before GPS and smartphones, they followed the route for nine days, overcoming mechanical issues and threats of sabotage, with 14 reaching the destination.

In the 1940s, with the U.S. facing a huge pilot shortage, more than 1,000 women were trained to fly military planes domestically, relieving male pilots who were sent to combat. The elite group of female pilots was known as Women Airport Service Pilots — WASPs.

While the WASPs were helping their country, they also dealt with sexism and even sabotage. And after World War II ended, the WASPs were disbanded, and it wasn't until nearly 30 years later, in 1973, that major American commercial airlines began hiring female pilots.

To think that before this, or even after



Members of the local chapter of the Ninety-Nines strive to promote the advancement of aviation through education, scholarships and events.

PROVIDED BY NINETY-NINES



The first meeting of the Ninety-Nines in 1929. PROVIDED BY THE NINETY-NINES

this, the path to becoming a pilot was based solely on merit ignores the reality: Some of America's best and brightest weren't even considered. Women who wanted to fly for airlines were basically told to buy a ticket or become a stewardess.

## Flight path to 747 captain

At that point, Laurie Reeves, then in her 20s, already had more than 4,000 hours of pilot time. Reeves, who recently turned 80, said that growing up in Connecticut, unsure of what she wanted to do, she didn't find flying. It found her.

She was given flying lessons as a gift. And after the third lesson, she was hooked.

"I couldn't think of anything else I wanted to do," she said.

She spent as much time as she could in the air, quickly becoming a private pilot, then a commercial pilot and a flight instructor.

She married the mechanic at the airport where she was busy working — as a flight instructor, director of operations and chief pilot for a charter company — when the airlines announced they were hiring female pilots.

She applied to American Airlines and was immediately rejected, told she didn't meet the minimum qualifications. She wasn't at least 5-foot-6. She was 5-3.

She recalls going to Denver for another interview and one of the first questions she was asked by a panel of captains: Did your husband give you permission to take this job?

"I had to tell them it was my husband

who was getting the information about how I could get the job," she said. "Then the next question was, 'How soon are you going to leave to have a baby?'"

She said that her husband had two children, and that was enough for her.

After she was told she didn't have enough turbine flying time, she got nearly 1,000 hours of that, flying commuter jets in and out of busy New York area airports. And then she was hired by United Airlines, flying for the airline from 1979 until 2003, with multiple type ratings, including for her favorite — the 747.

That's what she was flying on Sept. 11, 2001.

## In the air on 9/11

She was the captain of a United flight headed back to California from Tokyo. She remembers being on a rest break, lying in one of the bunks in a small closet, when there was a pounding on the door. She looked at her watch and thought, "My rest break isn't over yet."

There was another pound and a voice saying they needed her immediately. A printer in the flight deck that spit out long strips of paper with messages from flight operations and the dispatcher had delivered some news: an airplane had crashed into one of the World Trade Center buildings.

After the second tower was hit and all U.S. airspace shut down, they requested to land in Vancouver and, within maybe a minute, received that clearance.

When they landed, they told the passengers they were in Canada. And why they were there. As they waited several hours on the runway, part of a long line



Amelia Earhart stands under the nose of her Lockheed Electra in March 1937, the year she disappeared while trying to fly around the world.

PROVIDED BY THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

of planes, they piped in the news so passengers could listen through their headphones. Reeves remembers poking her head out of the cockpit and it was silent. Everyone was listening.

On the other side of the country, 38 planes ended up diverted to a small town in Newfoundland. That experience led to one pilot writing a book, which led to the Broadway show "Come From Away."

That pilot, Reeves notes, was a woman — Beverley Bass, a fourth-generation Floridian who grew up in Fort Myers and became American Airlines' first female captain.

## Generations of Ninety-Nines

Jessica Mendez, a 34-year-old first officer with American Airlines, represents another generation of Ninety-Nines.

She grew up in Minnesota. Her father flew for fun and became a mechanic. She was hanging around the airport at a young age, started taking lessons at 15, and on her 16th birthday — the first day she could fly solo — did exactly that.

When she was 18, she put together a team and entered a modern-day form of the cross-country air derbies of the past. One of the racers, a former WASP, was 88 years old. So there was a 70-year-gap between the oldest and youngest racer, drawn together by a love of flying.

Mendez moved to Miami after college, largely for the flying weather. She became a flight instructor, moved to Jacksonville for a job flying private jets, but ended up with a regional carrier, then American.

She's passionate about what the Ninety-Nines do to encourage girls and women, with scholarships, programs and mentoring.

She also is a mom of two, ages 2 and 4. Both boys.

She has a funny story about something happened a few months ago. Her oldest surprised her, telling her that he wanted to be a mommy.

"Why do you want to be a mommy?" she said.

"So I can fly airplanes," he said.  
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