

A WOMAN FLYING THE PLANE!

By Myriam Sfeir, Assistant Editor

It took me ages to land an Interview with Captain Roula Hteit, the first and only Lebanese female pilot working for the Middle East Airlines (MEA). Hteit was much younger than I had expected and it turned out that we were both enrolled at the American University of Beirut in the same year. Hteit is originally from Beirut, yet, she and her family were displaced several times. She lived in the South till her university years where she left for Beirut and attended the American University of Beirut. At AUB, she majored in Mathematics and left university in her senior year (she still had one semester to graduate) and traveled to Scotland to become a pilot.

Myriam Sfeir: What triggered your decision to become a pilot?

Captain Roula Hteit: It all started when one of my male classmates at the university complained about an add in the newspaper inviting females to apply and train to become pilots. He strongly believed that a woman's place is in the private sphere. According to him, "women are barely

capable of fulfilling their obligations of taking care of the family and household." I was not only offended but infuriated by his remarks. I challenged him and promised to apply and pass the test just to prove he was wrong. At that time I had no intention or inclination to become a pilot. To me it was just a challenge. I eventually sat for the test and managed to refute my colleague's false assumptions for I passed the test along with nine other male colleagues.¹ The fact that I was the only female to pass the test made me seriously contemplate taking the plunge. At the beginning I was enticed by fame and the limelights. Yet, once I took my first flying lesson my whole perspective changed.² I began to love what I was doing. Aviation is out of this world, the

feeling is inexplicable. There are no words to describe the sensation.

MS: How did your parents react to your choice of profession?

RH: My parents objected strongly to my decision to become a pilot. My father, being conservative and traditional, rejected the idea and refused even to discuss it. It was very difficult for him to approve of my choice of profession for it entailed traveling abroad, working late, sleeping overnight, etc. Yet, I was adamant, and when I passed all the required tests³ and received my letter of acceptance I dropped all my courses at AUB, returned a loan I had taken to pay for my tuition, and gave my father the choice either to approve of my decision to travel or to expect no future for me. Eventually, following several heated battles my father granted me his approval. My mother and sister were supportive all along and helped me in convincing him. Now my father has accepted the fact. Anyway my work is not very tiring I usually fly four to five times a month⁴ and most of my flights are round trips. I sleep no more than two nights away from home.

MS: In which university did you study, what are the subjects required, and how long did it take you to graduate?

RH: I studied at Perth Aerodrome in Scotland. It is one of the best aviation schools in the world and is frequented by students from different nationalities. I was sent by MEA along with two other male colleagues (one of them is my present fiance). I lived in Scotland for one year and one month and received a Commercial Pilot License. During the first two months we learned how to communicate via a radio (radio telephonic). We studied meteorology, the theory of aviation, the plane, its engine, other mechanical instruments and how they function, etc. After that we started alternating between flying lessons and theory courses. Our first 15 hours of flying were spent with an instructor, but then we started to fly solo. I still remember the magnificent feeling that engulfed me the first time I flew a plane on my own.

In Scotland we were trained on several different planes,⁵ and when we returned to Beirut we started practicing on MEA jets. Overall it took me approximately three years to become a pilot. Aviation involves a lot of hard work and training. Although I have finished my university degree, there are always workshops and training sessions to attend. We constantly have training courses on how to operate new planes bought by MEA. Besides, every six months we

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receive a medical checkup to ensure that we are healthy,⁹ and a stimulator test introducing us to all the emergencies that are bound to occur on a plane as well as a route check. So aviation is not an easy profession, it entails endless studying and a lot of hard work.

MS: Did you face any discrimination?

RH: At Perth Aerodrom I faced no discrimination whatsoever; men and women pilots were treated equally. Yet, when I came back to Lebanon I faced a lot of problems, for the mentality here is traditional. For instance, I had to undergo training that was much more intensive than any of my male colleagues. The trainers always kept in mind that I am a female and all eyes were on me waiting for me to commit a mistake. I often complained about their unfairness for I was constantly scrutinized and under surveillance. This strictness in training is not just prevalent in the Arab world, it is common elsewhere too for I have read that the first female pilot in the USA experienced similar problems. Besides, some pilots at MEA strongly believe that females are incapable of flying a plane. I don't even try to prove myself to them. I have confidence in myself, and they have to realize that they are no better than I am. I really do not understand why gender should matter once one qualifies to become a pilot.

MS: What are people's reactions when they learn that you are the captain?

RH: Once we were going to Jeddah and the door to the captain's cabin was open, an elderly man saw that I was the pilot in charge. He was so terrified that he started screaming hysterically, "I do not want to die." The flight attendants tried to calm him down telling him that had I not been capable of doing my job they wouldn't have entrusted me with their lives. He managed to calm down and once we landed he thanked me and apologized. After that incident I stopped doing the passenger announcement because passengers in Lebanon cannot accept the idea that a woman is capable of flying a plane. I once went to collect my uniform, and the lady in charge refused to give it to me informing me in a very strict manner that Captain Hteit should come and pick it up himself for he has to try it on. I told her that I was captain Hteit, but she did not believe me until

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I showed her my ID which gave her such a shock. At first, such incidents used to upset me but now I'm getting used to it.

MS: Congratulations on your engagement. How did you meet your fiance and what are you planning to do once you get married? Will you go on with your career?

RH: My fiancé is a colleague of mine. We are both pilots. We met in Scotland and studied together. We used to argue a lot when we were colleagues for he was very traditional in his thinking. He refused to accept the idea that I was his equal. Yet, gradually he began to change especially when we had to do our training together in Frankfurt. He realized that I was as good and efficient as he. He has changed a lot since we met and is now convinced that the only difference between us is our sex. He is very supportive and understanding. When we get married I will go on with my work, but when I get pregnant I will have to stop working for a while. The Middle East Airlines still does not have any rules and regulations regarding maternity leave, for I am the first female pilot in Lebanon. Even my uniform is just like my male colleagues' uniforms. It's a man's world. What I presume MEA might do is look into other European airlines regulations and try and devise their own. For instance, British Airways allows a pregnant pilot to fly until she is 3 months pregnant, then she has to stop. Two months after delivery she is allowed to resume work after undergoing intensive training courses, tests, as well as medical checkups. If I decide to stop working for one year after conception I would be entitled to unpaid leave, yet once I return to work I would have to undergo intensive training sessions, simulator tests, etc. Apart from marriage, I am planning to finish my final semester at AUB in order to acquire a BA. in Mathematics.

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ENDNOTES:

- 1 Two thousand candidates sat for the test
- 2 In one of the tests I had to sit for, we were taught how to fly a plane
- 3 A written test, then a medical, then an interview, then a test in Jordan, and finally one in England
- 4 The maximum Hteit has flown is seven round trips per month.
- 5 They were trained on single engine planes and twin engine planes with several seats.
- 6 There are a lot of limitations when you are a pilot. If you are overweight, have an earache, or a cold, you are stopped from flying.