

AINsight: More Women Finding a Place in Aviation

by [Rolland Vincent](#)
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It is often said that stereotypes don't die. To be fair, it is probably more accurate to say that stereotypes don't die easily. Stereotypes can sometimes seem equivalent to the nature of things. Something is the way it is because it has always been this way – there is no changing, and no need to change it. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a stereotype is “a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.” Curiously, the word “stereotype” has its origins in the early 19th-century printing business, where a stereotype plate was used to replicate typeset words.

One stereotype that seems to have the half-life of uranium-238 is that men and women perform best in certain jobs. For example, some believe that men are more suited to technical and mechanical fields, where strength and stamina provide comparative advantages. Others believe that women are better suited to nurturing and educational roles in society, where interpersonal skills and empathy are essential enablers of success. While there may be some elements of logic to each of these stereotypes, are they true? What exactly might that even mean, and why is it important for business aviation?

In aviation, a technology-centric and traditionally white male-dominated industry, it has largely been “fact” or “reality” that most key roles have been performed by men. In many organizations today and certainly in the past, it is quite commonplace to be in a room, a hangar, or an aircraft where most of the “real jobs” were being performed by men. For most of the 116-year history of “manned” powered flight, the aviation industry has been mostly powered, piloted, and promoted by men. Wilbur and Orville Wright leveraged their skills as Dayton, Ohio bicycle designers and mechanics to create a successful wing-warping glider, and then a wind tunnel, and, with key contributions by the talented mechanic and self-taught engineer Charles Taylor, a lightweight engine that would eventually take them aloft. Charles Rolls and Henry Royce started out in the automobile industry and designed early aero-engines, two of which eventually powered John Alcock and Arthur Brown eastbound on the first nonstop transatlantic flight 100 years ago.

The early days of aviation were filled with the likes of Otto Lilienthal, Octave Chanute, Louis Blériot, and Alberto Santos-Dumont, each a pioneer in their own right. Across Europe, the likes of Marcel Bloch, Anton Fokker, Geoffrey de Havilland, Frank Whittle, Harry Hawker, Willy Messerschmitt, and Hugo Junkers were at the forefront of discoveries and technological evolutions that shifted a nascent industry ever faster and ever higher. Across the Atlantic, the peaceful and empty skies above America were the testing grounds for people like Igor Sikorsky, William Boeing, Clyde Cessna, Donald Douglas, Charles Lindbergh, Howard Hughes, Elrey Jeppesen, Dwayne Wallace, and Walter Beech, all of whom pioneered the ways aircraft were designed, built, and flown.

Later, innovators and inventors including Bill Lear, Burt Rutan, Sam Williams, Gary Burrell, Min Kao, and the Klapmeier brothers pushed the boundaries of the industry further outwards, bringing business and general aviation aircraft and technologies to a broad base of customers. Historically speaking, aviation's runways, factories, and airways have been largely established by men gifted with passion, purpose, and persistence.

Easy to overlook in the “truth” of aviation history is the role that women have played. Some of the earliest aviators were women, but most of their names are little known except to aviation historians. France's Raymonde de Laroche was the world's first female pilot, earning her stripes in 1910. Canada's Elsie MacGill was the first woman to earn a master's degree in aeronautical engineering. America's Amelia Earhart was the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, and during World War II, the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) were employed as test pilots and ferried many aircraft across oceans to war zones. Olive Ann Beech was the co-founder of Beech Aircraft Company and its president and CEO from 1950.

Today, the journey for women at the top of the aerospace industry continues with Kathy Warden (Northrop Grumman), Marillyn Hewson (Lockheed Martin), Phebe Novakovic (General Dynamics), and Leanne Caret (Boeing Defense, Space, and Security) leading their respective organizations. Never to be forgotten, where would any of us be without Rosie the Riveter, a cultural icon and an image of backbreaking hard work, tenacity, and productivity that helped turn the tide of World War II?

Business aviation's talent shortage is being felt across much of the industry today, as skilled people look for the best return on investment when it comes to where they want to spend their careers. Isn't it a shame that we have collectively and probably individually not yet done enough to make the industry more diverse, inclusive, safe, and fascinating for the other half of the world?

I recently attended the International Aviation Women's Association GA conference in Napa, California and was fascinated to hear about one person's aviation career journey. Kimberly Perkins is an ATP-rated pilot who commands a large, ultra-long-range business jet on behalf of one of the world's largest publicly traded companies. With an impressive resume of aviation and educational credentials, she is an inspiration to many who meet her, especially when

they learn that, beyond her busy professional and personal life, she has created a nonprofit (www.aviationforhumanity.org) to deliver school supplies and other donations to young school children in need across the world. Aviation is an industry that helps open our eyes to the truth that is out there; Captain Perkins helps those who are paying attention to realize that we can be the change we want to see in the world. (Editor's note: Kimberly Perkins writes about diversity issues in aviation, including these articles published by AIN: "[How industry could attract more women to the flight deck](#)," and "[It's time we all support gender parity](#)."

Although aviation—general and business aviation in particular—remains a “good ol’ boys club,” the times are changing. Fresh perspectives and ideas, like flowers in Spring, are everywhere, helping us navigate toward a better and more inclusive future, one where we break down stereotypes and open up the skies above us to a world of possibilities.

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