

A Charter Member Retires

Captain Jean Haley Harper, United Airlines

Some of life's most significant events occur in an unexpected instant of clarity, like falling in love or discovering one's career passion. That is how I realized, on an enjoyable road trip with our son, that I'd had all I wanted of airline flying, the best career I could ever have imagined.

Recently I'd been fretting over persistent, degenerative ankle pain caused by an old skydiving injury, for which I'd received two surgeries in the past ten months. My female vanity and pilot's pride didn't like to admit that my body was breaking down, and my patience with the endless barrage of changes at work was wearing thin. I considered the options; retirement, of course, was an irreversible choice not to be taken lightly. Still, I tentatively tried the idea on for size--and to my astonishment, it fit like Cinderella's slipper! With a rush of inspired certainty, I knew this was the right decision and the right time.

Had it really been thirty-five years since I'd been hired, with Gail Gorski and Debra Powers, as one of United's first female pilots? My heart was pounding as I stepped into the SFO Flight Operations building for the first time in the spring of 1978, wearing my trim little uniform, to open stares and murmuring. I put on a brave smile and extended my hand to the group of men who regarded me with cool skepticism.

"Hi! I'm Jean Haley" I said, doing my best to control my nervousness, excitement and overwhelming sense of wonder. I marveled at the most senior pilots--elderly, silver-haired gentlemen with leathery faces, shoulders stooped from hauling heavy suitcases and flight bags since the big recip-engine days of the 1940s. What stories those vintage aviators must have to tell, and what grand adventures!

"Poor John looks like crap" a pilot muttered.

"Yeah, well...he is fifty-seven," another responded, and they nodded knowingly.

A sobering thought struck me--would I be as aged and weary three-plus decades into my own future? Although retirement was the farthest thing from my mind at the beginning of my probationary year, I was later dismayed to hear how badly some pilots had dealt with the end of their careers. Times were different then, shaped by generations with clearly-defined gender roles, especially for males whose personal identity was inseparable from their respected titles and wage-earning abilities. I sympathized with these gentlemen who reminded me so much of my own deceased father (a crop duster pilot), but made myself a solemn promise--no matter how much I loved my job, I would not hang on that tightly.

Occasionally, however, the thought crept in—how would I feel, with a landmark birthday looming, on the day I had to set the parking brake for the very last time? Would my heart break just a little over that final goodbye, and would I need a moment alone (and maybe a Kleenex or two) to process the life-altering permanence of it all?

But that day was so, so far down the road, and my career was just beginning! We women had to quickly establish our footing in a working environment that ranged from simmering resentment to the celebrity treatment—sometimes in the space of a few minutes—and we longed for the day when our presence would no longer be regarded as a distracting intrusion.

One morning, only two months after our arrival, Gail, Debra and I were thrilled to receive invitations to an exciting event in Las Vegas, Nevada—the first-ever social gathering of female airline pilots in the United States! The mutual support and encouragement we drew from our interline sister pilots was immeasurable needed, and I returned home on an exhilarating high that lasted for weeks.

Our ISA friendships remained strong throughout our personal and professional evolutions in the jobs of our dreams. I was also grateful for the breaks in my career—a furlough, maternity leaves, personal and medical leaves—which allowed time with my growing family and the opportunity to pursue other long-term interests. Each time I returned to the line refreshed and eager to fly again.

It was encouraging to see a healthier trend among my own generation of pilots, with a significant reduction in obesity, smoking, and other career-shortening ailments. Workouts soon replaced cocktail hours as the layover relaxation of choice—and before I knew it, 'Age 60' didn't seem that old any more. As my fifty-eighth birthday approached, I was mentally, emotionally and financially prepared for retirement. While flight planning for an early departure one morning, a shocked expletive broke the silence of the crew room. Everyone turned towards an open-mouthed pilot facing a computer screen.

“Check your e-mail,” he said. A minutes-old news item confirmed that pilot retirement age had just been raised to sixty-five. I was stunned—as pilots we are used to dealing with limits, and in the blink of an eye a monumental one had disappeared. The age issue, of course, had been hotly debated for decades with no action, so I was not counting on anything to change. This new reality was a bit disorienting. Although grateful for the option to fly for another five years, I winced for my co-workers caught on the other side of the divide: just-retired captains who would have given anything to work longer, and seasoned first officers whose upgrade hopes would be delayed for several more years.

Reminiscent thoughts flowed gently over me five years later as I ate a solitary dinner on the night of my last layover as a United pilot. I had consciously guarded against maudlin sentimentality while on duty, as I still had to be the Captain for one more day. But in the fading golden light of sunset, I couldn't help feeling a bit lonely. No one was home, as all my family

members were en route to Los Angeles, where I would pick them up the next morning on my final leg to Denver. My cell phone rang, breaking my reverie—and to my surprise it was my longtime ISA friend, Karen Kahn.

“So where are you right now?” she asked.

“Houston.” There was a moment's pause.

“What hotel?”

“The Airport Marrio...are you here too?”

“Yes! I'll be right up!”

What a delightful coincidence, and how appropriate to wrap up my career in the cheerful company of a fellow ISA Charter Member and past President! (Back when we had those position titles....) We had shared over half a lifetime of challenges, setbacks, accomplishments and the deep satisfaction of our mutual career dreams coming true. I sank into bed gratefully that night, in complete peace and contentment.

The next day dawned sweet and clear, and all the way to Los Angeles I excitedly looked forward to joining my family. From the moment I spotted their happy faces in the crowded boarding area, my mood was effervescent. The rousing applause that greeted my ‘final flight’ P.A., with my husband Victor in the jump seat and my mother and our two kids in first class, was deeply gratifying.

The smooth-as-glass air for my final takeoff and departure, the magnificent views of desert canyons, one of my better landings (thankfully!), the stunning spectacle of the water cannon that made us exclaim in unison, and the passengers cheer was an experience of pure, magnified joy. The closest I came to getting choked up was not from shutting down the last engine, but from the startling—and long—standing ovation I walked into upon entering the terminal. The beaming smiles and shouts of congratulations from a crowd of happy strangers was profoundly moving, as they represented to me all the passengers I've had a hand in safely transporting over the decades.

The majority of my same-generation airline pilot friends who have retired all say the same thing, “You're going to love it!” For me, having the choice to ‘say when’ at age sixty-three and a half made all the difference. Instead of a poignant loss, completing my career on my own terms felt more like a graduation. Of course there are things I'll miss...the views from altitude, the pleasantly familiar destinations, the sheer exhilaration of maneuvering a sweet-handling, responsive jet...and most of all, the people. But my memories will be of warm gratitude for all I've been so blessed to experience, which will always be a part of me.

I'm gladly looking forward to life's next big adventures, and tackling my long and varied list of ‘want-to-dos’. Happy flying, and God speed to you all!