

DEBORAH LAWRIE

Class grouping:

Whole class and pairs (if desired)

Time:

20 minutes

Purpose:

The purpose of this activity is to introduce students to the achievements of Deborah Jane Lawrie (nee Wardley). Deborah was the first woman to become a pilot with a major Australian airline after winning a landmark sex discrimination case against Ansett Airlines. She was the first Australian woman pilot to stake and win an equal opportunity case. Deborah's case serves as a stern reminder of how important it is to continue to fight to gain and maintain equal rights between men and women.

The activity in this resource works well if the teacher is able to read the attached excerpt before commencing the lesson. This enables the identification of difficult vocabulary words that may require further elaboration. Younger students may also need to be supported as they answer the related questions.

Activities:

1. Whole class activity: Read attached excerpt on Deborah Lawrie's life and achievements.
2. Whole class activity (individually or in pairs): complete reflection questions on equality.

Preparation and Materials:

- Read excerpt.
- Print copies of reading material.
- Write questions below on whiteboard (or print a copy for students if desired).

Reflection Questions:

1. What kind of skills did Deborah have that should have qualified her to be a pilot?
2. What was the immediate consequence of 'Reg' Ansett stating his 'personal belief' that women should not be pilots?

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3. Why do you think that Ansett Airlines believed that the sexes 'shouldn't be mixed'?
 4. Think of three reasons why it is unfair to deny a woman a job because she 'will have children'?
 5. Why do you think Deborah was initially treated badly, even after she won her case? Use specific examples from the text and be sure to explain your answer.
 6. In your opinion, what is the most astonishing reason Ansett provided for why women shouldn't be pilots?
 7. In 100-150 words, explain why Deborah might be an inspiration to young people—both male and female alike.

Activity 1

Whole class activity: Read the following document as a class then answer and discuss questions.

Early life and education

Deborah Lawrie was born in Sydney on 14 May 1953, and her family later moved to Melbourne. She graduated with a degree in science from the University of Melbourne in 1974 and a diploma in education from Rusden State College in 1975.

She obtained a private pilot licence in 1971 (aged 18) and a commercial pilot licence in 1973. She logged 2600 flying hours and became a general aviation flying instructor and charter pilot in 1976.

On 2 August 1978 Deborah Wardley (nee Lawrie) lodged a written complaint with the Equal Opportunity Commission in which she alleged that Ansett Airlines had discriminated against her on the grounds of her sex in refusing to employ her as a commercial airline pilot. She claimed she had all the qualifications necessary: a commercial pilot's licence, Morse code rating, over 500 hours flying time, passes in the theoretical subjects necessary for a senior commercial pilot's licence, a Bachelor of Science and a Diploma of Education.

Case against Ansett

Lawrie first applied to Ansett Airlines in 1976 and continued sending applications for two years. During that time, 10 fellow male flying instructors were accepted into the Ansett pilot training program. She was finally interviewed in 1978 but was rejected. She took the case to the then new Victorian Equal Opportunity Board under the direct discrimination provisions of the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1977, and challenged Ansett's rejection as a breach of this recently enacted legislation.

Sir Reginald 'Reg' Ansett denied the allegation of discrimination but admitted that it was his strong personal view that women were not suited to be airline pilots. This led to public demonstration marches in August 1979, and a successful 'girlcott'; businesses were encouraged by women to transfer their travel accounts from Ansett to TAA (Trans Australia Airlines) and, in the first six months, Ansett lost more than 50 per cent of its business travel. A lot never returned.

In a letter to the secretary of the Women's Electoral Lobby, the general manager of Ansett wrote:

Ansett has adopted a policy of only employing men as pilots. This does not mean that women cannot be good pilots, but we are concerned with the provision of the safest and most efficient air service possible. In this regard, we feel that an all-male pilot crew is safer than one in which the sexes are mixed.

Ansett raised a number of objections to the employment of women as pilots, including:

- That pilots needed strength, even though there was no strength test for pilots;
- That unions would object;
- That women's menstrual cycles made them unsuitable for the job;
- That pregnancy and childbirth would disrupt a woman's career to the point where it would jeopardise safety and incur extra costs for the company. This was Ansett's main legal argument.

Outcome of case against Ansett

The Equal Opportunity Board ordered Ansett to accept Deborah as a trainee pilot in the airline's next round of intake. Ansett objected and began a costly legal case that went all the way to the High Court of Australia. In essence, the company did not want to employ women pilots because, it argued, they were more expensive than men, as women would cease flying for long periods when they became pregnant and had children. However, it was to prevent exactly such discrimination that the Board was established.

Deborah won her appeal and began flying for Ansett in 1980. She believes that Ansett continued to try to discourage her from flying as there were always delays with the paperwork she required. The company insisted she wear the same uniform as men, saying, 'You want to be a man, look like one'. After Deborah had worked as a pilot for about six months, her male colleagues began to become accustomed to her presence. She was a feisty person who firmly asserted her rights. By the time of the 1989 pilots' dispute Deborah was an experienced pilot with more than 6000 hours flying. Nonetheless, as a woman, she felt an additional pressure to perform and knew that her superiors would pounce on any mistake she made as grounds for dismissal.

Later career

In her later career Deborah progressed to jet aircraft, going on to fly the McDonnell Douglas DC-9, Boeing 727 and Boeing 737 with Ansett Airlines. She was one of 1,640 pilots who resigned en masse following the 1989 Australian pilots' dispute. She briefly returned to teaching and had her first child, Thomas, in January 1991. She published her autobiography in 1992.

In 1993 she moved to the Netherlands to work as a pilot. In 1994 she became a Fokker 50 instructor. In 1998 she became Flight Safety Manager and Chief Flight Safety Investigator for KLM Cityhopper. In 2007 she was a senior Airbus A330 captain with KLM.

Now divorced, she has resumed using the name Deborah Lawrie.

After reaching the mandatory retirement age for airline pilots in Europe, Lawrie returned to Australia in 2008. She joined Jetstar Airways as their Safety Investigations Manager and worked as an occasional pilot in order to maintain her Airbus A320 type rating.

In July 2012 she joined Tigerair Australia and is currently an Airbus A320 Captain and instructor.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deborah_Lawrie



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