

“Glamour in the skies – the Golden Age of the Air Stewardess”

by **Libbie Escolme-Schmidt.**

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Foreword by

Frederick Forsyth CBE.



A romantic and nostalgic read for foreign correspondents, travel writers and anyone who flies around the world. ‘Glamour in the skies – the Golden Age of the Air Stewardess’ is a cocktail of the development of aviation itself, tales of bravery, celebrity gossip - and sex, served with a dash of feminist history. Air industry technological breakthroughs and news events such as the Berlin Air-lift and the Busby’s Babes Munich Air crash are covered from a female cabin crew perspective.

Pictures in the book evoke by-gone eras. Short Empire flying boats in the 1930s and 40s, ‘Crossing the Line Certificates’ presented to passengers flying across the Equator in the 50s and airline promotional photographs of stewardesses across the ages, with captions such as ‘It is not every girl who gets to make a Prime Minister’s bed!’ The black and white photograph shows a stewardess aboard a Britannia preparing the bed for Sir Harold and Lady Dorothy Macmillan for the Prime Minister’s 1958 Commonwealth tour.

Former BOAC Air Stewardess, Australian Libby Escolme-Schmidt makes a credible claim to being first to document the history of British Airways’ stewardesses and their predecessors. In 1930 Boeing Air Transport in the United States hired the first eight stewardesses, all of them registered nurses. In the 1940s Air Vice Marshall Don Bennett CB, CBE, DSO who commanded the Pathfinder Group of Bomber Command during the war hired the first British women stewardesses for his new airline BSAA. His fleet of

converted bombers had names starting with the word ‘Star’. The stewardesses were dubbed ‘Stargirls’. Most were women who had served in the forces in World War 2.

Mary Guthrie flew as a BSAA Stargirl on the first official flight out of Heathrow in 1946. During the war she had been a pilot flying Spitfires with the Aircraft Transport Auxiliary. From a 21st century perspective the career move from Spitfire pilot to cabin stewardess typifies the career set-backs meted out to women in post-war times even today.

In the mid 1950s BOAC recruited Japanese stewardesses based in Tokyo and Chinese based in Hong Kong as their first foreign nationals. By the late 1950s and early 1960s thousands of young women across the world coveted the glamour of becoming an air stewardess - meeting famous celebrities face to face (or face to dinner plate), flying to exotic destinations, staying in luxurious hotels and having love affairs. Much of the book is based on interviews with pilots and cabin crew. Many recount favourite personal stories about movie stars, singers, royalty, sport and business entrepreneurs. In her days as a BOAC stewardess the author failed to recognise movie star Marlon Brando and had him thrown off a flight as a suspected terrorist. Helen Gough who flew from 1957 – 1962 remembers her brush with General Montgomery of Alamein. “He was in the first class cabin and asked to have me changed as he did not like being served by women.”

Sex discrimination and misogyny permeated the airline industry as strong as the whiffs of Yardley after-shave cologne offered free of charge to male passengers in both first and tourist class. This was the pre-Sex Discrimination Act era. The airline’s emphasis in job selection was on beauty and glamour. Women cabin crew



had to retire after 10 years service or aged 35, whichever came first. Men stewards were allowed to continue flying until they were 60 and beyond.

Dress code and personal appearance is a theme running through the book. The first British stewardesses wore versions of armed forces uniforms, but soon glamour and sex-appeal became priorities. Annetta Markham was a BOAC stewardess in the swinging sixties. She recalls the freedom for women in that era. Given today’s image of life in Saudi Arabia her description of dress-code in Saudi nearly half a century ago is hard to imagine. She recounts “In



Blantyre, Malawi, we had to cover up our short dresses in a full length wrap-around. However, in those days there was no such modesty in Jeddah or any other Saudi city and we happily walked around in skirts barely covering our backsides at times.” She recalls, “Summer dresses were so short that when you lifted the passengers’ hand-luggage into the overhead lockers you almost showed your knickers. There was a craze amongst us at one time to flaunt knickers that said ‘Fly Pan Am!’”

Vocabulary changed too. Depending on airline and Era there were Stargirls, Air Hostesses, Air Stewardesses and Cabin Attendants.

One of my favourite quotes from the book is when former Stargirl Eva Branson says, “I never dreamt that our small band of pioneering women had begun a career that would multiply into several thousands. And we never imagined at the time where civil aviation would go. I certainly never thought my son would start an airline – Virgin Atlantic.”