

Five weeks of stress by Yvonne Peel.

The stewardess course was a revelation. We were treated like children. We had curfews! Goodness, I left England because I wanted freedom and here I was being told what to do, how to do it, when I could go out, what time I had to be in, and what and when to study! It was a very intensive course.

We had to learn about the different types of aircraft. When I started flying the fleet included Viscounts, Vanguards, DC-9, D-C8's (my favourite) and soon the 747. The Lockheed 1011 and numerous other types then followed over the years.

We were unusual, in as much as we had to learn all of the different type aircraft in the Air Canada fleet, whereas pilots and some stewardesses from other airlines were only allowed to fly on one type of aircraft at any one time. Of course, this was great for Air Canada but not so great for us because we had to ensure that we were familiar with all the different emergency procedures, meal services and peculiarities of each type of aircraft. It was not unusual to fly on several different types of aircraft in the course of any one day.

The course lasted for five weeks, during which time we were taught deportment (walking with books on our heads to walk nice and upright), manners, how to dress, perfectly manicure our nails, had make-up lessons and were advised how to wear our hair. This was particularly important and I can only guess at the tons of hairspray I have used over the years! Some poor girls who had long hair had to have it cut short and this caused many a tearful episode.

It was worse than being school because the trainers were basically the ones who could pass us and allow us to fly and lo and behold if you ever fell afoul of one. My trainer was really nice but very strict, but this was not always the case with some of the others and I was just incredibly lucky. Looking back, maybe this was good training on how to deal with difficult passengers!

We were measured up for our uniforms which consisted of three dresses. One blue, one red and one white with differing coloured collars. Imagine a white dress to serve passengers!! We had to wear them a certain length and no shorter than so many inches above the knee. It was, of course, the days of minis and hot pants and it was not long before the hem of our dresses inched up and up our legs! This did, however, have a downside because as soon as the passengers sat down, the men would ask us to put their coat up in the overhead rack and by doing this, we would stretch up, this resulting in our dress riding up and their eyes being level with our panties! !

Also, we had blue raincoats in the shape of a tent for the summer, and to the despair of us all, a little red hat a la Jackie Kennedy which kept falling off, or flying off in the wind.

A short red winter coat with a pair of shiny, skin-tight knee high boots finishing off the "ensemble" and the skin between the edge of the coat and top of the boots was purple with cold in the sub-zero winter temperatures!

But the thing that really got to us was the ridiculous bow we had to wear in our hair (coloured, of course, to match our dress!) and also the leather bows which had to be clipped onto our shoes and which never stayed on! ! We had to wear high heels, and at the end of a day, our feet felt as if they were on fire!

Before each flight, we had to be "checked" to ensure that we wore the uniform correctly "as it should be and with pride"!!

Nevertheless, as far as I was concerned, I would have walked through fire, just too finally get my wings

There was a huge amount of work and information to assimilate and to have to study with two other girls in our bedroom was quite difficult.

We had to learn about security and emergency procedures, these were drummed into us. We had to do regular drills such as jumping into water, righting an overturned life raft, sliding down emergency chutes and practice evacuation techniques on both land and water. But the fire drills were the scariest and were all part of this very intense training. We had to enter into smoke filled mock-ups of

planes, put out fires, open doors and windows and evacuate passengers and re-direct crowds of people in case a door or window became blocked by fire or debris.

This was actually the real reason we were on board. Security and safety were way more important than serving passengers or handing out newspapers!

But as far as I was concerned, the shouting of the emergency drills was the worst of fall. We had to be word perfect and one word out of place and you had to redo the whole thing! Three misses and you were dismissed.

This carried on for the following 31 years of my annual exams! We had to prove that we were up to date with all the new procedures and equipment for all the new aircraft types added to our fleet.

Not only that, but we were also trained to deal with difficult situations. Such as methods of trussing a passenger in case he/she became a danger to us or others.

This is easier said than done if you are dealing with an inebriated or dangerous large person. Of course, it is not just the fact that you have to tie him/her up, but then you have to make sure that you "check periodically to ensure circulation is not impeded"!

Passengers under escort could be handcuffed but never to any part of the aircraft. We could be dealing with "non-violent" or "violent" deportees. Some of the accompanying escort officers could be armed! Great, all in a days' work then!!

Unaccompanied children, disabled, deaf or blind passengers needed special attention especially if their dog was brought on board. Each of these special cases had to be individually briefed on security and emergency procedures.

And, of course, we had to be trained to deal with all types of medical emergency situations.

We always had to carry our "red book". This was our "Bible". It made us aware of any changes to the emergency equipment or procedures needed to be legally allowed to fly. It had to be kept up to date and we seemed to have to keep removing and adding pages which all seemed to be identical to the previous ones! It got heavier and heavier as more types of aircraft were added to the fleet, but had to be carried everywhere we went. It was a legal requirement.

I was told at the beginning of the course, that I was too skinny and would need to put on weight. This, of course, had the opposite effect, and I lost weight instead! I was, of course, naive enough to believe them, as I now realize they would not have invested all this time and money training me, just to fire me for being too thin!!

Finally, the great day arrived, and I received my certificate and my wings. No one could have been happier and I was delighted to be based in Montreal.

I was given an employee number, and from then on I became a number! Everything I did, any communications to and from Air Canada had to include my number! I became "32708"! My new life was beginning, and I have never, ever regretted my decision.

We, (females) were hired as stewardesses, but the men were immediately hired as pursers and this meant they were "in charge", even if we had more seniority than them.

We, the stewardesses, had to sign a 10-year contract, the pursers did not. They had a career for life if they so wished but we did not!

I was hired as a temporary stewardess for the summer months and then laid off, then rehired full time in March 1970 when the fun really began!

In the intervening months, I worked for an umbrella organization representing all the well known Canadian charities and was outraged to see how money donated by individuals and companies was wasted on corporate events, fancy restaurants and smart offices when that money could have been used to help worthy causes. I swore I would never give any money to charities unless I knew exactly where the money went.