

AVIATION INDUSTRY

Regardless of the slogans and victories of the women's liberation movement in the Sixties, there are still many professions in which women remain in the extreme minority. The aviation industry is one of them, with women comprising only 3 per cent of professional aviators globally. In some cases, there's a single woman flying the flag at the top for the gender. In an industry where so few of the workforce are female, captain Davina Pratt, chief pilot and head of operations of the Irish national carrier, Aer Lingus, has made a mark as the first woman to be appointed to that position.

In some respects, her name belongs up there with other pioneering female aviators such as Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, in 1928; Helen Richey, the first female pilot to be hired by a commercial airline in the US, in 1934; and Lynn Barton, the first female pilot for British Airways, in 1987. Not that Pratt would court the comparison, but whether she'd care to admit it or not she is a first. To this day, she insists: "In the aircraft, I'm just a captain like the rest of the guys out there."

Of the 550 pilots who fly for Aer Lingus, 42 are female and fewer than half of that number are flight captains – a proportion that is only slightly higher than BA's.

Pratt's was born the eldest of six, with a father who worked as a mechanic. She was the first to be able to help him in the workshop. "Then my brothers came along and were always doing something in the house, [with] motorbikes, cars or JCBs," she says.

Being the eldest, perhaps, fosters a certain amount of independence, a trait that was reinforced by going to a mixed boarding school at the age of 11. During her time there, subjects such as English and French took a back seat and sport became a real passion. She even considered PE as a career option, she says.

Pratt says aviation was brought up at some point at school, but "I suppose I wasn't given a lot of encouragement". However, she is quick to excuse her school, saying it didn't have the resources. "We didn't even have a full-time external career guidance teacher. Someone used to come in and talk to us for a few hours."

Not that it's wrong-footed her career. Pratt says that once computers were introduced to the curriculum, she was hooked and went on to study computer science at the Dublin Institute of Technology. She enjoyed technical college, noting that it was a very different animal from university, with smaller class sizes and longer hours. Pratt says that it "lent itself to getting on with it".

An Aer Lingus advertisement for co-pilots, brought to her attention by a friend, aroused her interest. "It was very catchy. It said 'By the time your friends land their first job, you'll be landing this jet'," she recalls.

She and her friend applied, along with thousands of others. "I got the job and he didn't," she says.

"If it had been a computer job I had been applying for, I would have been far more uptight and concerned about not getting it. I really felt I had nothing to lose. This was really a dream and if it worked, great, and if it didn't... well, oh well," she reasons philosophically.

Although Pratt is now a little dismissive of the pressure she was under, it was her first experience of interviews and aptitude tests, but she tackled it with a spirited air. It's an attitude that crops up time and time again during

Flag-carrier for women

Davina Pratt is the first female to be made chief pilot at the Irish national carrier, Aer Lingus. **Anne Giacomantonio** spoke to her



Flying high: Davina Pratt, centre, with cabin managers Gary Kelly and Carmel Hart

our conversation, but it also belies Pratt's obvious talent and application.

Pratt says she only noticed the gender imbalance when she found herself in an all-male group interview. Her final success meant flight school with a class of 15, which included two other female trainees. The group caused quite a stir upon arriving at the flight training school in Scotland, she recalls. "We got a bit excited in the beginning, because we heard we were going to Perth, but it wasn't Perth, Australia – it was the wind and the rain of Scotland."

At the time, the school trained crew from many international airlines, but apart from her fellow Irish citizens she remembers just one female Kuwaiti engineer and a Spaniard as the only other females training. "From the day I signed up, we all mucked in together. We all treated each other the same and were treated the same by Aer Lingus," Pratt says.

"The one thing about the whole aviation game is that everything is standardised. SOP, Standard Operating Procedure, that's how you do it, and when you get into a cockpit, you are label-less effectively. You fly the same way, you taxi the same way, and you make the calls the same way."

Her job has also given her the opportunity to test-fly some of the new Airbus additions to the fleet. "It was fantastic – like getting your hands on a new car," she says.

She hasn't quite got her hands on the enormous A380, though she maintains, as other pilots do, that the Airbus aircraft are standardised, so once you've flown one you've effectively flown them all. "Once you are at the pointy end with the bus behind you, you forget about it really."

She also escorted the Ryder Cup on an Aer Lingus flight in 2006 and has flown the first flights from Aer Lingus's new bases in Gatwick and Belfast.

"I have been very lucky to get where I am," Pratt says. "It's a very dynamic job. There is always something new happening in the industry."

Commenting on the economic downturn that has hit aviation, she says: "This is when we have got to get our heads together and tighten the purse strings." But she stresses that her main focus throughout is safety, which she takes very seriously. "Regardless of what's going on, my job is to ensure the airline is running safely."

It's easy to see why Pratt is regarded as a role model, even if she isn't 100 per cent comfortable with the title. Despite shunning the media limelight, the reaction from students and people from her home town to an interview in the *Irish Independent* a year ago made her realise how important it is to have someone like her to look up to. "I don't mind. I kind of just get on with life," she says.

She gives talks in schools, particularly to girls about the importance of maths and science, and admits that it's a very different pathway now to a job in aviation than it was in her younger days.

Pratt thinks there has been an improvement in the availability of careers information, but acknowledges the cost of learning to fly can be prohibitive.

"A lot of families with kids that want to fly have to face the reality of paying for it," she says.

And she freely admits that had she found herself in that position, she wouldn't have made it. The hope is that airlines reintroduce their conditional training schemes once the economy picks up. Whatever the circumstances, Pratt's success in a field so dominated by men can hopefully only spur more women into a career in aviation.