



Captain Trembath recently commanded Flight SA-260 an AS340-600 from Frankfurt to Johannesburg with an all women crew. Mike Wright chats to her about her career.

Tell us a bit about your school going years

I grew up in Cape Town and matriculated from Wynberg Girls High in 1982. I got the idea of becoming a pilot a year before, when on our family holiday I went in a light aircraft for the first time and just knew I had to be a pilot. Since I'd never heard my parents say 'women can't do that' I didn't think of any limitations, or realise how uncommon flying was for a woman at the time.

When I announced it at school, my classmates thought it was hilarious, and the teachers and principal thought I was making fun of them. After I joined SAA and they would occasionally fly with me, they were excited to see me flying.

How did your early flying career start

I trained at flying clubs at Cape Town International (then DF Malan) and got my Com in 1984. It took me several months to find a job – I got turned down by two companies specifically because I was a woman.

Eventually in 1985, Namib Air (now Air Namibia) hired me. I flew mostly Cessna twins from Eros Airport, Windhoek. I also flew the Beech 1900, when Namib Air bought the first two in 1987.

In 1988 I joined SAA as one of their first women pilots. Since then I have followed a fairly standard career path at SAA, flying as a copilot and as a captain both domestically and internationally.

Your move on to the A346 - what other aircraft have you flown. I assume you fly the A340 313 as well.

SAA A340 pilots fly all variants, as well as the A330. When we got the A330s in 2011, I was one of an initial dedicated group who did our

CCQ (cross-crew qualification) in Toulouse. I also had the wonderful opportunity to ferry ZS-SXU brand new from the factory.

How did it feel like to be the first SAA all lady crew?

My first international flight with an all-female flight deck crew felt like a normal flight – we just did the job!

However my very first flight with all-female crew, including cabin crew, was in 2001. I felt proud that we made a statement for women that day. On that flight, though, I waited until after takeoff to announce that we were all ladies, just in case any smart alec wanted to get off!

How many women pilots does SAA presently have?

At SAA we have 70 women pilots, 9%, which is a higher percentage than many major airlines:

- American Airlines – 4%.
- Lufthansa, British Airways – 6%
- Air France – 7%

Women in aviation in SA – are you happy with the progress at this time?

Yes, I believe women are well represented in South African aviation, especially comparing internationally.

You have a womens aviation association in South Africa – can you tell us a bit about this?

This would be SAWIA – run by Refilwe Ledwaba, a SAPS chopper pilot.

The info below is from their Facebook page, where young ladies can be in contact with them:

Southern African Women

In Aviation is a non-profit organisation dedicated to the empowerment of women in the aviation and aerospace Industry in the SADC region.

Mission: Inform Connect Motivate and Inspire the future generations

SAWIA's vision is to make aviation a viable and accessible career choice for women.

SAWIA's objectives are :-

- Establish an industry-wide network platform to connect women in aviation.
- Mentor and educate to provide support to women into aviation.
- Facilitate access to funding for skills development.
- Establish partnerships with strategic stakeholders.

The organisation seeks to be the primary resource point for both established and aspiring female aviation professionals in the region. The organisation has also established a Women/Girl fly Programme in Africa (WGFP) essentially an educational and information programme for high school students that have an interest in the aviation and aerospace industry. The programme is designed to expose young women and the public to a world of opportunities, while highlighting the achievements of women in Aviation and Aerospace.

Are ladies fairly treated in SA aviation?

There are no overt barriers these days to women in South African aviation. One still finds traces of prejudice which a woman must find the inner strength to deal with – I faced a lot over the years! Now I do motivational speaking about how I learnt to overcome it.

Another barrier, not covered by CRM and which I also speak about, is communication – how men and women communicate differently,

leading to misunderstanding. I give tips on how to bridge the gap. Also, men learn to socialise in a hierarchical structure, women in a flat structure, so we don't have as instinctive a grasp of organisational politics. This becomes more applicable in bigger companies.

Any advice for aspiring lady aviators out there. Its seems that with the sluggish economy potential airline entrants are struggling to get their hours up

Advice to young pilots trying to find a job: Your hours and ratings are not all – an employer looks at you as a person and a leader. Be confident, be yourself, and present a professional image with a neat appearance, proper business etiquette, and quality of written communications.

Do you have a family - how do you then cope with long haul flying?

I don't have children, but some of the ladies do. Those who choose the long haul say they find it easier because of having time off between flights. However, as with all pilot moms, it's important to have a good support system.

Any other observations?

Many of the challenges faced by women are faced by men as well – how to finance your flying and how to find your first job. Also, one is not always given a hard time by Captain Grumpy just because you are a woman – he gives men a hard time too. Women must talk to each other, find someone senior to guide them, and hang in there through the hard times. Any flight to the top will include a little turbulence – but the reward is the destination!