

## [Flying skies friendly and hostile](#)

United pilot's memoir recounts derring-do, sexism, airsickness

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Early in her flying career, Meryl Getline was ferrying an air taxi back to Anchorage when a door blew open at 10,000 feet over the Gulf of Alaska.

Belted in, she remained safely in the pilot's seat. But everything else in the pressurized cabin was sucked out, including her logbook - the only record of the hundreds of hours she had flown since getting her license at the age of 20.

"I thought, there goes my career," she says, from her current vantage point as a Denver-based senior captain for United Airlines.

After looking more closely, the young pilot saw that her briefcase, logbook inside, had somehow caught on a metal strut extending from the wing to the fuselage and was being held in place by the wind, just out of reach.

It was a put-up or shut-up moment.

"I trimmed up the controls as best I could, grabbed the strut with both hands and inched myself out," she remembers. "Then I used my chin and just sort of maneuvered it toward me."

After landing safely, the fledgling wing walker saw what might have happened had she failed to retrieve her irreplaceable cargo: the Cessna Skymaster's flight manual, caught in a similar way, came loose and "went through the propeller like confetti."

Getline, now 50, recounts this and other obstacles she has overcome - including airsickness so severe she passed out on her first flight lesson - in "The World at My Feet," a memoir due out this summer.

As a chronicle of adventure and determination, it has won plaudits from none other than Frank Abagnale, the legendary con man portrayed by Leonardo DiCaprio in the movie "Catch Me If You Can."

"The one thing Meryl and I certainly have in common," says Abagnale, who passed as a Pan Am pilot for two years in the 1960s, "is the belief that nothing is impossible."

Beyond the book, the

flying public also can get to know Getline through an interactive website she has set up

to answer people's questions about airlines, airports and

aviation in general:

Wonder which airport is the most technically difficult to fly into? Mexico City, she says.

What plane is the most fun to fly? "Whatever airplane I'm flying."

How do men feel about women in the cockpit? "These days it is thankfully pretty much a nonissue."

Visit [www.fromthecockpit.com](http://www.fromthecockpit.com) , in short, and feel the skies get a little friendlier.

"I don't consider my job just getting people from Point A to Point B. That's primary, but I also want our passengers to have a good experience, and communicating with them is part of that," Getline says.

"I won't answer any questions about security, but I can answer questions about how planes fly and what terms mean, or why runways are designated the way they are and how we know what route to follow on the ground."

She says her venture has been applauded by higher-ups at United, but officially, the Chicago-based airline neither supports nor opposes it. As spokesman Jeff Green explains, "It's kind of her own private project."

The unpretentious website, which has gotten off the ground only recently, may not warrant the kind of acclaim accorded to winners of the Super Bowl - whom Getline once carried, in fact, as a charter pilot for the San Francisco 49ers.

But for folks who wouldn't know an aileron from an altimeter, it offers both revelations and reassurance.

Karen Wira of Louisville, Ky., a travel consultant who has known Getline for several years, says the "Cap'n," as Getline jocularly refers to herself, is far more keen on keeping passengers in touch with the flight deck than most pilots.

"I'm not sure that it's just that she's a woman. It's the person she is," Wira says.

"She takes away the discomfort that some people feel about having a woman in the pilot's seat by drawing you in and talking about things. Like with turbulence, she'll say it's kind of like going over a rocky road, and you believe her. She's understated and unassuming and smart, and you can tell she knows what she's doing. She's confident, and in a lot of cases, that's all that fliers want to know. It takes away the unknown."

Getline also is passionately in love with flying. Her enthusiasm is so infectious that passengers have been known to gather around her at the end of a flight as if they were waiting to meet a celebrity.

Says Al Carmickle, a retired United captain she describes as her "better half": "She gets more compliments on one flight than I got in 36 years."

Getline, who grew up in San Diego, stepped into a cockpit for the first time on a trip to Europe to study German for high school. But it didn't occur to her to get her wings until she was in her second year in college at San Diego State, when she saw a poster advertising an extension course for private pilot ground school.

"That's the day everything changed," she says. "My interest switched from linguistics to aviation, and then I found out the hard way that I get radically airsick."

The queasiness wasn't as bad at night as in the daytime, however, so she managed to keep her dream aloft by taking flight lessons at 3 a.m.

Ironically, even though she no longer gets ill, she still prefers flying at night. And because most pilots would rather work days, this means she usually receives the shifts she wants.

Once she obtained her private pilot's license - paying for the instruction with money she made in real estate, a sideline she pursues when her schedule permits - Getline decided to join the military in hopes of logging lots of hours in the cockpit. But she was told the Air Force wouldn't admit a woman into flight school, so she enlisted in the Army instead, thinking she could at least get her foot in the door as an air traffic controller.

"I was a horrible soldier," she confesses. "The first thing I did was rent a plane and fly five of my buddies out to the West Coast from boot camp in Alabama for Christmas leave. On the way back, the airplane broke down in Dallas, and we all had to hitchhike back to the base - by air."

Getline was 21 at the time. As she tells it, she got out of the Army after several similarly audacious adventures, then went to work as a pilot for a commuter airline in Southern California.

She obtained a DC-10 jumbo-jet rating by the time she was 27, then flew for the now-defunct Wien Air Alaska before signing on with United in 1985.

"I had always wanted to go with United, because I'd flown it as a kid and they treated me well. I also liked their routes, I liked their airplanes and I liked their paint job," she says with a laugh.

"But my timing was spectacularly off."

She first sought a position with United in 1977, but at the time, the company only hired male pilots, and her application was rejected. Only a few months later, United hired its first woman pilot.

The second time she applied, in 1985, she got an interview. But it was only a few months before the Air Line Pilots Association went out on a contentious 30-day strike, and her decision to accept an offer and start training on United planes later got her blacklisted.

"To this day, there are people who consider me a scab, even though I never flew a revenue-producing flight during the strike," she says.

Getline and eight other pilots filed suit against the union in 1992, complaining they had been ostracized and subjected to various forms of post-strike harassment. But the claims were never resolved because the case was dismissed on technical grounds.

More recently, she says, she has received obscene hate mail from website visitors she assumes were part of the same aggrieved group. But ALPA spokesman John Mazor says the union doesn't encourage or condone such behavior.

"If there was anything going on, it would have been the actions of individual pilots," he says.

As a member of the first generation of female airline pilots, Getline also has faced sexual harassment. One pilot in Alaska told her, "Why don't you go home and have babies?" Her response: "Lovely."

In general, she says, "I feel like my co-pilots today are quite friendly. If there is any hostility, I haven't seen it for years and years. They're either more OK with it or they're hiding it pretty well."

Pioneering pilot Bonnie Tiburzi, the first woman captain for a major airline, says it took "true passion and endless determination" for Getline to triumph over the sexism she faced early on.

"What keeps surprising me is that every new generation seems to have skepticism about female pilots," says Tiburzi, who recounted her experiences in the 1984 book "Takeoff." "Meryl came along some 12 years after I was hired, and at least a hundred or so other women (were also) airline pilots, yet she still ran into opposition. She was still told women 'don't' and women 'shouldn't.' To her credit, she stuck to it and persevered."

As one of about 7,500 active United pilots, Getline flies 75 to 90 hours per month, not counting preparation time, layover time or the hour it takes to drive each way between Denver International Airport and her home in rural Elbert County - a 9,600-

square-foot abode she shares with Carmickle, two ferrets and an exotic tropical bird named Houdini, "because he can get out of anything."

Mostly, she pilots Airbus 319 or 320 jetliners on domestic routes and flights to and from Mexico, Canada and Puerto Rico. She also has been a co-pilot on lengthy flights to and from Asia, and before she faces mandatory retirement at 60, she hopes to achieve her ultimate goal: taking the controls of a Boeing 747.

In her years with United, Getline says, she has never been involved in a crash or serious incident. But as a pilot for a small commuter line in California, she once survived a bird strike that barely missed killing a passenger.

It happened over a fishing village on the Baja peninsula in the late 1970s, when a turkey buzzard came through the windshield of her small twin-engine craft, sending shards of glass into the face of a man sitting in the co-pilot's seat.

"We were on final approach, the windshield was covered with blood and guts, and I couldn't see to land," she says. "So I turned the plane sideways, took a peek and came in."

The passenger, whose injuries didn't turn out to be life-threatening, was quickly washed off with a bottle of water and sent back to Los Angeles on another plane to get stitched up.

But because the phone at the airport didn't work, Getline had to go into town to order a replacement windshield - aboard the only transportation available at the time, the four-legged kind.

"On the way back, it's raining and I'm on a burro named Pepe," she says. "I'm thinking, so this is aviation."

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