SMILE

Particularly in Bad Weather
Dr Prudence Black is a Research Associate in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. Her award-winning book *The Flight Attendant’s Shoe* about the design history of the Qantas flight attendant uniforms was published by NewSouth Books in 2011. As well as her academic work she undertakes consultancies relating to corporate branding heritage and is regularly asked to talk on local and national radio regarding matters to do with fashion, design, uniforms and aviation.
SMILE
Particularly in Bad Weather
The Era of the Australian Airline Hostess
Prudence Black
CONTENTS

Introduction 1

SECTION ONE: TAKE-OFF 7

Chapter One – Welcome Aboard 9
1.1. ‘The Sky’s the Limit’: The First Air Hostesses 9
1.2. ‘An Adventurous Streak’: Holyman’s Airways 11
1.3. Glamour Girls of the Air? 22
1.4. Magic Carpet Across Australia 28
1.5. ‘Don’t Sleep on Duty’: Airlines of Australia and Australian National Airways 31
1.6. First Air Hostess Killed 38

Chapter Two – Setting the Standard 46
2.1. Gimlet Eyes: Matron Holyman 46
2.2. War Interrupts 51
2.3. The Gulf Run and the Territory 57
2.4. Daly Waters and Guinea Airways 66
2.5. The War Ends 67
2.6. When Things Crash and Burn 69
2.7. ANA Goes International 76
2.8. A New Decade: A New Disaster 81
SECTION ONE:
TAKE-OFF
ANA Route Map of Melbourne and Tasmania, c.1946

This map was included in an Australian National Airways brochure 'Your Route Map' allowing passengers to follow the path of the plane mid-flight but also to know something about the places they were flying over. Other route maps in the brochure included Melbourne to Sydney and Sydney to Brisbane. Courtesy of South Australian Aviation Museum.
Chapter One

WELCOME ABOARD

1.1. ‘The Sky’s the Limit’: The First Air Hostesses

*The newest career in the world. And, equally the strangest.*

Francis Vivian Drake, 1933

*Do you really think you’d like flying?*

*There’s danger, there’s lots of responsibility, and there’s a great deal of work at times…You may be trapped in almost any kind of weather – rain, snow, hail, sleet, fog. You must be calm and resourceful and courageous. We demand a great deal of loyalty.*


Within a year of Blanche Due and Marguerite Grueber being appointed as the first Australian air hostesses on the small regional Holyman’s Airways, an article appeared in January 1937 in the Melbourne newspaper, *The Argus.* Caught by the wave of interest in this new profession, the journalist Tessa Fubbs described the overwhelming number of young women rushing to apply for a job where demand far outweighed availability. She quoted one of Australia’s first air hostesses negotiating her new profession:

*It is interesting work and the conditions are good, but it keeps you busy all the time, and is sometimes strenuous*
Smile, particularly in bad weather

and exacting. It is all routine. You do meet interesting
people, but not as many as you would meet in a shop.
It is a career that lasts only a few years, offers little
or no promotion, and leads nowhere. If the object is
matrimony get down to earth and stay there. Elderly,
well-married businessmen are in the majority as pas-
sengers, and that young handsome passenger is probably
inexperienced and will be too excited or too ill to pay
any attention to you.  

For some, this description of the profession might take them
straight down to earth but for thousands of young women in
the late 1930s right through until the 1980s airline hostessing
was a highly sought-after job. It was one like no other. This was
the only job where young women were paid to travel, not only
nationally but also across the world. It offered women a legitimate
way to escape a predictable life at home with their parents, or a
staid career behind the secretarial desk, or an inevitable engage-
ment to the boy next door.

It is no coincidence that the idea of the ‘hostess’ took hold
during this period.  
The strong ideals of the domestic hostess
were easily transferred to imagining the idea of the interior of a
plane as a lounge room in the skies. For many years the popular
magazine the Australian Women’s Weekly crafted the persona of a
woman’s role as hostess, positively reinforcing certain skills and
attributes in the everyday routines of this work in progress that
was the Australian housewife. Article after article would extol the
virtues of what constituted a good hostess. Indeed, just over a year
after the air hostesses came on board in Australia, the Australian
Women’s Weekly made the bold claim, ‘Every women enjoys acting
Welcome Aboard

as hostess. It is one of the gracious attributes of the feminine sex, but few have the opportunity of “hostessing” in the clouds.6

The air hostess was situated in a liminal space; on the one hand she was employed to be a ‘hostess’ as she invited passengers into the confines of the planes, where she would serve food and drink while offering pleasant exchanges about the weather and the geography, along with gentle inquiry into the passengers’ welfare. On the other hand, she was a young woman expected to manage and operate difficult technology, enforce safety procedures, and enact company policy with a degree of responsibility that might typically be expected of someone way beyond her years. The notion that the profession was a romantic one was often seen alongside the idea that the job offered an opportunity for a sense of adventure. An article from 1937, ‘Exciting New Career for Girls’, described air hostessing as having none ‘of the humdrum of the ordinary career. It is a career of adventure, glamor [sic], travel, thrills and hazards’.7 The association of ‘thrills and hazards’ with the new role of air hostess seemed an improbable fit, but this is precisely how the career played itself out in the bumpy world in the clouds.

1.2. ‘An Adventurous Streak’: Holyman’s Airways

Smile, particularly in bad weather (1936)8

Early in 1936, Holyman’s Airways in Tasmania had been ‘flooded with applications’ from ‘girls’ in Sydney, Melbourne and Launceston for the two positions of air hostess to fly on the new all-metal fourteen-passenger Douglas DC-2, Bungana. The name ‘Bungana’ was supposedly taken from an Aboriginal word for
Smile, particularly in bad weather

‘chief’. The newly appointed aviation writer in the local paper the *Launceston Examiner* wrote that many of the applicants were ‘society girls’, though what was required for the initial positions was a knowledge of nursing and stenography.9 Meanwhile, the Hobart *Mercury* said that what the selectors were looking for was ‘young women of some social standing, able to shoulder duties and responsibilities closely akin to those of a ship’s purser and to maintain “office status”’.10 Other requirements were physical fitness and stamina, calm temperament, a working knowledge of psychology and a pleasing personality. Blanche Due was 20 years old when she was selected for the job, which she described as appealing to her ‘adventurous streak’.11 She had completed forty hours of flying but had let her pilot’s licence lapse. Her work experience included a business course, seven months of nursing at the Alfred Hospital and a first aid course at the Homecraft Hostel in Melbourne.12 Nursing would become a qualification that was required of all Australian airline hostesses, following from the tradition set in 1930 by the first air stewardesses, as they were called in America. In preparation for the job she had collected tourist pamphlets and memorised everything possible about Tasmania and Melbourne.

Marguerite Grueber had flown as a passenger many times and completed two hours of dual-control flying.13 Prior to joining the airline Grueber had been employed as a secretary at the Hobart radio station 7ZL.14 It was expected that typing and shorthand skills would come in handy in the airline office on the days when she was not flying.15 On the 11th March 1936, Grueber had received a letter from managing director, Ivan Holyman advising her that she had been selected for the coveted job. She was expected to attend the Launceston office at the end of the month to undergo a fortnight’s training before commencing on the service run.16 At that
Welcome Aboard

Time, Holyman’s Airways had flights between Hobart, Launceston, Flinders Island, King Island, Melbourne, Cootamundra, Canberra and Sydney. Late in April there was a demonstration flight on

Marguerite Grueber and Blanche Due in front of the Royal Mail DC-2
Bungana, Holyman’s Airways, 1936
Marguerite Grueber and Blanche Due were employed as the first two air hostesses in Australia when they began working for Holyman’s Airways in March 1936.
Courtesy of National Library of Australia

13
Smile, particularly in bad weather

the Bungana. A journalist from the Launceston Examiner described in detail the sequence of events once the plane took off: ‘...a light flashed, requesting passengers to fasten their seat belts, but once off the ground the air hostess indicated the belts could be undone, and passengers walked about the roomy cabin, exchanging comments and taking photographs of the city of Melbourne...’ The journalist found the ‘machine’ exceptionally quiet in the air, and the fourteen passengers in their cushioned adjustable chairs were at times louder than the ‘faint engine noise which penetrated the sound-proofed cabin’. Along with morning tea and biscuits, cigarettes were offered.

‘What do you think of the uniforms?’ Jane asked as they left the tailor. ‘I love them. They’re so trim and business like, yet feminine at the same time. What a contrast to a nurse’s uniform.’

Ruth S. Wheeler, Jane, Stewardess of the Air Lines, 1934

Grueber and Due designed their own navy military-style uniform, which was made by a tailor in Collins Street, Melbourne. And not only were they expected to look the part, they were required to be spokespersons for the airline. Grueber even conducted a radio broadcast with broadcaster Les Daley:

Announcer: And now Listeners, we want you to meet the hostess of the flying hotel...come and say ‘How do you do’, Miss Grueber!

Hello everyone...this is the Hostess of the airliner speaking...I’d like to tell you all something about the plane...and the job.

But first the plane. It’s a marvellous ‘ship’ – we call her that – and travelling in the air is a lot smoother than
travelling in another sort of ship. From my seat right at
the rear of the plane...just in front of the tiny buffet, I
have a clear view of all the passenger accommodation...
and there's a little red light over my head which shows
when any one passenger happens to require my atten-
tion. Sometimes they do you know...But it doesn't take
very long to get used to the motion of the airplane...and
this one in particular is as steady as the rock of Gibraltar.

And now...something about passenger comfort...
evry seat if fitted in such a manner can be reversed, so
that passengers can face one another...and each seat is
ultra comfortable...being equipped with a headrest as
soft as down and cushiony as the softest pillow. There is
too an excellently designed arm rest and beneath that is a
rack-fitting to which we attach trays when refreshments
are served. Speaking of refreshments ...we carry lots
of things...but no alcohol...that's forbidden by regula-
tions...but we stock everything in the soft drink line.

The interior of the Bungana has a definite colour
scheme...soft blue leather lines the cabin...the seats are
carried out in blue whip cord...and all the metal is
bright. Every passenger has an individual window, also
a reading light – which can be switched on or off at will
–and we have air-conditioning...the very latest thing for
comfort in travelling. There is also a control that allows
me to alter the humidity inside the cabin at will ...oh...
by the way...passengers are allowed to smoke on this
plane...that should tempt the menfolk who usually want
to go about in trains.[sic]

The duties of the hostess are to fix the straps around
each of the passengers' legs before the plane takes off...
Smile, particularly in bad weather

and remove them when it’s in flight...generally we attend to the wellbeing and comfort of our passengers until they disembark. We wear a very snappy uniform and with my colleague Miss Due, share the distinction of being the first air hostesses appointed by an Australian airline. We're both fond of flying...and up to now have not been able to gratify our ambitions – but I think that hurdle no longer exists...cheerio everyone.23

The first scheduled flight was on Saturday 2nd May 1936 and it took two hours and fifteen minutes from Essendon, Melbourne to Mascot, Sydney with an average speed of 186 miles per hour. On board were eighteen persons including Captain Ivan Holyman and Mrs Hazel Holyman, Mr Harold Gatty of the Douglas Company, engine expert Mr W. G. Langville, two pilots, a radio operator and ten paying customers. Grueber was described as the busiest person on board, ‘checking the passenger list, putting aboard the coffee and sandwiches to be served in the air, and answering questions – particularly answering questions – were her duties’.24

Refreshments also included barley sugar, cordials and iced water. The hot drinks were served in waxed cups until it was realised the wax would melt and stick to the passengers’ lips. Later they were replaced with something more suitable. The passengers chatted and smoked while they flew; they were allowed cigarettes and cigars but not pipes. While on board Captain Holyman sent telegrams outlining the delight of the passengers with ‘the perfect weather and the silence of the engines’.25

The DC-2 had been designed and ‘geared for the well to do – the mining magnates and the business tycoon’.26 In America, on the Trans World Airlines (TWA) DC-2 service, they screened films including the newly released *Flying Hostess* (1936). The film
Welcome Aboard

Collecting tickets and welcoming on board, 1936
In expectation of experiencing the elements, passengers carrying blankets and overcoats are welcomed on board the Holyman's Airways flight by Marguerite Grueber. Courtesy of National Library of Australia.

was described as ‘a romance as fast moving as the airliners around which the story is filmed’. The plot was centred around ‘the turbulent romance of a charming air hostess’ Helen Brooks (played by Judith Barrett) and ace pilot Hal Cunningham (William Gargan)
who, despite falling in love with her, had an immediate dislike for air hostesses because he felt there was no place for women in the air.28 In a true Hollywood plot twist, Cunningham realises that an air hostess can be an asset when Brooks averts a disaster when the pilot on duty is knocked out mid-flight by a criminal. With Cunningham helping via radio, Brooks flies the plane to safety. While there is no record of it appearing on planes in Australia, *Flying Hostess* was released in 1937 and shown across the country. The film was advertised in a newspaper article, ‘Would you like to be an air hostess?’, that described the practical details of the working life of an air hostess as a ‘modern branch of flying’.29 The film was also advertised in the *Camperdown Chronicle* later that same year promoting what it took to be a ‘flying hostess’: ‘Her life’s record is investigated thoroughly; she must pass rigid tests for nerves and courage; and she must pass exacting medical examinations’.30

The introduction of the two air hostesses on the Holyman air services proved a success, so on 25th May 1936, Phyllis (‘Pat’) Daniels, who spoke French fluently31 and was a trained nursing sister from Launceston, and Gladys Allan from Newport, Victoria began flying for the same airline.32 One of the requirements for the job was nursing skills, as many of the passengers experienced airsickness, not only because of the unpressurised planes and rough crossings of the Bass Strait but also due to nervousness. The competitive nature of the position prompted the *Australian Women’s Weekly* to write an article suggesting there was some bias towards selecting ‘girls’ from the south, ‘Are southern girls more quick-witted at answering questions, or better informed than girls from NSW, Queensland, South Australia or West Australia?’ they asked, ‘Or are they of a lighter build and therefore less weight to carry in an aeroplane?’33 The article acknowledged that the latest recruit, Gladys Allan, originally from Victoria, was ‘a very pretty
Welcome Aboard

blonde, who is a very serious-minded young women with a taste for serious literature, contract bridge and amateur acting'. She was also a ‘gifted pianist, and has taken her A.I.C.M. and other degrees’. Allan had flown a number of times as a passenger on a friend’s plane,\textsuperscript{34} and although she had learnt dual control she was ‘never rich enough to train for a pilot’s licence’.\textsuperscript{35} This was a comment repeated by many air hostesses who would have liked to have pursued flying lessons but were without the financial means to obtain a licence.

Along with the \textit{Bungana}, Holyman’s Airways flew the de Havilland DH-86, which until the DC-2 had seemed so modern; the plane had cabin windows that were sealed, making normal conversation possible, and its four engines were equipped with an electric self-starter, so there was no longer the need to hand crank the propellers. Ivy Moore, a passenger, described her flight on the de Havilland DH-86 Express \textit{Loila} from Sydney to Melbourne on 22nd July 1936: ‘The hot tea offered by the dainty little air hostess, Gladys Allan, with her uniform cap perched jauntily on a crop of golden curls, was gratefully received. This intrepid lassie had already made twenty-eight crossings over Bass Strait, and in two months had flown more than 9,000 miles’\textsuperscript{36} The plane landed safely in Melbourne, and Moore thought ‘a touch of glamour’ was added to the bustling scene of the airport with the pilots and air hostesses in their uniforms. She described senior air hostess Marguerite Grueber taking over the next leg of the flight on the \textit{Bungana} from Melbourne to Hobart as ‘a rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed Tasmanian girl, slim and dignified’ who ‘marshalled us to our seats as the engines roared, and triumphantly the great Douglas was off, like an arrow from a bow, speeding towards Port Phillip’.\textsuperscript{37} What was new, at the time, was the way such a gendered description would be immediately linked with technological enthusiasm.