Emily Hanrahan Howell Warner had hit a wall, or, rather, a glass ceiling.

The year was 1973. For five years, Warner, a flight instructor, had applied unsuccessfully to become a pilot at Frontier Airlines, a Denver-based U.S. passenger airline, in a time when there were no U.S. women passenger airline pilots. She had turned 30 in 1969 and saw her own former flight school students, who were all male, being hired. But in January 1973, Frontier made Warner the first woman to be named permanent pilot for a scheduled U.S. passenger airline. Previously, in 1934, aviation pioneer Helen Richey had been the first woman to pilot a commercial airline on a regularly scheduled run.

On Feb. 6, 1973, Warner served for the first time as second officer on a Frontier Airlines Boeing 737-300. The flight departed from Denver and went to Las Vegas, St. Louis, and back. Within six months, Frontier discontinued its use of second officers, and Warner was named a co-pilot. In 1974, she became the first woman to be a member of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA). In 1976, she became the first woman to be a captain on a U.S. scheduled airline, flying a Twin Otter. In 1986, she commanded the first all-female flight crew in the U.S.

In addition to piloting for Frontier, Continental Airlines, and United Parcel Service, Warner was a flight school instructor and manager in Denver, Colorado. In 1991, she began working for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) as a flight designated flight examiner holding multiple ratings.

Her career has been recognized by the National Aviation Hall of Fame and National Women’s Hall of Fame. Her Frontier pilot’s uniform is on display at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum.

HER STORY

Emily Hanrahan was born October 30, 1939, in Denver, Colorado.

Her parents taught her and her siblings (four brothers and a twin sister) to believe they could achieve anything. But her family could not afford to send her to college. So, instead, after graduating from high school, she began working in retail sales at the May Company store in Denver.

As she worked, occasionally flight attendants would come into the store, and she began considering a career as a flight attendant. As a teenager, she did not meet the flight attendant minimum age requirement, put in place because attendants served alcohol to passengers. Still, she’d never flown before, and decided to take a flight to see if she liked it.

“I bought a ticket on Frontier Airlines in a DC-3,” she said of her first flight to Gunnison, Colorado, in 1958, reports Airport Journals. During the flight, she was able to see the cockpit.

“I looked out that front window, and it just hit me,” she recalled in a Denver Post interview. “It’s so beautiful looking out that front window instead of looking out of the sides.” Noticing how excited Warner was, one of the pilots suggested she take flying lessons. Warner remembered her response: “I said, ‘Gee, can a girl take flying lessons?’”

It was not long before she began taking those flying lessons at Clinton Aviation, housed at Stapleton Airport in Denver. It cost her about $13 per lesson. She left the May Company to become a receptionist at Clinton and continued obtaining multiple pilot license ratings. At 21, she was a full-time flight instructor with her own airplane provided by Clinton Aviation, a Cessna 150.

Warner had read about Turi Wideroe, a Norwegian pilot who, in 1961, had become the first woman documented as an airline pilot outside the Soviet Union with Scandinavian Airlines System. Warner wanted to pursue a career as an airline pilot.

Her flight training business was thriving as returning troops sought flight training. Many of the men whom she had trained accrued flying time and then left for commercial jet pilot jobs.

In 1968, she began applying for a position at Frontier Airlines, as well as Continental Airlines and United Airlines. By 1973, she had thrived in the aviation industry for 15 years. She had accrued 7,000 flight hours and multiple FAA certificates and ratings: private pilot, commercial, instrument, multi-engine, instructor and Airline Transport pilot. Her resume also included chief pilot, air taxi and flight school manager, and FAA pilot examiner. She was in charge of the United Airlines Contract Training Program for Clinton Aviation.

A friend who worked with Frontier introduced her to the vice president of flight operations there. She was not offered a job immediately, but Warner persisted until she was hired in January of 1973.

She had crashed the glass ceiling for women commercial pilots. The term “glass ceiling” is in reference to an intangible barrier that prevents women or minorities from obtaining upper level positions. This door-opening achievement is just one piece of the long flying career Warner experienced. After flying for Frontier, Continental, and United Parcel Service, she began working for the FAA as an inspector.

What did the woman who opened doors for so many other women have to say about the current climate for women in aviation?

Even as recently as 2014, Warner still was frustrated by inequities women encounter in aviation. When women are not given the same opportunities as men, Warner told the Denver Post, the U.S. and all countries are “only using half of their manpower.” As she put it, “If they only use men, they’re losing a lot.”

Additionally, at the time of her 2014 induction into the National Aviation Hall of Fame, Warner was aware of the challenges women still faced pursuing a career in aviation. “Not as many women are learning how to fly, and you’ve got to build your flight time,” she told the Post, “and if you have a family, it’s tough.” And still, when she was 74, she loved the view that had captivated her as a teenager. “I still love it (flying),” she said to the Post. “You don’t lose that – looking out and seeing that world in a different way.”

Warner died July 3, 2020, at the age of 80. When she was asked once how she hoped to be known, as aviatrix or female pilot, she replied, “Captain will be just fine.”

“I still love it (flying). You don’t lose that – looking out and seeing that world in a different way.” - Emily Howell Warren

**Overcoming Barriers**

On her second flight as a commercial airline pilot, the captain told her: “Don’t touch ANYTHING on the flight.” She recalls that it took about a year to feel acceptance from other pilots. The attitude change began with a high-ranking Frontier captain. “You get that acceptance, and it gets around, and everybody accepts you.”

**Video Links:**

* Emily Howell Warner – Legend of Aviation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9swUJNOujw>

* Barrier breaking Piot Emily Howell Warner Dies At 80.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6214_Anw4kY>

**ACHIEVEMENTS INCLUDE**

* Was the first woman hired as a pilot by a U.S. commercial airline (1973)
* Was the first woman to become a member of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) (1974)
* Was the first woman to be a U.S. airline captain (1976)
* Inducted into Colorado Aviation Hall of Fame (1983)
* Commanded the first all-female flight crew in the United States (1986)
* Inducted into the Women in Aviation International Pioneer Hall of Fame (1992)
* Name entered in the International Forest of Friendship (1993)
* Inducted into the National Women’s Hall of Fame (2001)
* Inducted into the Colorado Women’s Hall of Fame (2002)
* Selected as one of the 100 most influential women in the aviation and aerospace industry.
* Nominated by Women in Aviation International (2003)
* Inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame (2014)

 