

Deborah, the jet pilot

From the age of 14 Deborah Lawrie* wanted to fly. She had a pilot's licence by the time she was 19. While teaching high school students she gained a commercial pilot's licence and became a qualified flying instructor.

Deborah wanted to fly big jets. In 1976 she applied for a job as a pilot with a major Australian airline. She completed interviews and tests with Ansett, then waited for news of her application.

Ansett rejected her application in 1978. Flying large aircraft is a highly skilled and highly paid job. The airline said it was a 'man's job'. Deborah thought this was unfair. She knew her test results were better than those of at least one man hired as a pilot by Ansett.

She also discovered that the airline's refusal to employ her was unlawful. In 1977 the Victorian Government had passed an Equal Opportunity Act which stated that an employer must not discriminate against a person because of that person's sex.

So Deborah made a complaint to the Victorian Equal Opportunity Board. The Board decided that Ansett had discriminated against her and ordered Ansett to employ her as a trainee pilot.

The airline appealed against the decision. The case went to the High Court. Supporters raised money to help pay Deborah's legal costs. The media publicised her challenge to discrimination against women in high status employment. Deborah Lawrie won her battle and became Australia's first female domestic airline pilot.

* Deborah Lawrie was known as Deborah Wardley during her campaign to become a commercial airline pilot.



Cartoonist Peter Russell-Clarke's comment on Deborah's first commercial flight. In 1980, after overcoming many obstacles, she co-piloted an Ansett flight from Alice Springs to Darwin. What is the cartoonist trying to suggest about Deborah's victory?

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