

## FLYING THE CAPITAL WAY, PART II

BY

Kristin B. Lloyd

01997, The City of Alexandria, Virginia

The same year Capital's Viscount took to the skies, the carrier began offering service to more southern cities. One new route, for example, was from New York to New Orleans, with stops in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, points in North Carolina, Knoxville, Chattanooga and Huntsville. The Civil Aeronautics Board also granted Capital the authority to offer non-stop service from Detroit to New York, Chicago to New York, and Norfolk to Atlanta. The opportunity to provide non-stop service was especially welcome. Serving fifty-one cities

from New York to Minneapolis, and south to New Orleans, Capital's airplanes sometimes shuttled between cities only 50 miles apart. These hops were popular with business people, but long-haul routes were more cost-effective and the airline badly needed them to balance its route structure. In 1958,



A new Capital Airlines corporate insignia was introduced in 1960, however, it was soon replaced with the United Airlines shield when the two carriers merged in July, 1961.

*(Courtesy of L. B. Boyd)*

after many petitions to the Civil Aeronautics Board, Capital was finally awarded non-stop routes serving Florida.

Capital offered world-wide charter flights to business travelers, club groups, athletic teams, and conventioners through its Special Flight Service. It was the first airline to offer aircraft, crews and maintenance for private business charters.<sup>24</sup> The sale of these flights helped to offset the seasonal

decrease of revenue during the late fall and winter. A long list of organizations chose Special Flight Service, including the American Legion, Ford Motor Company, Girl Scouts of America, Seagram Distillers and Time, Inc.

Ohio State University, William and Mary College, University of South Carolina, the Brooklyn Dodgers and the San Francisco 49'ers were among the many college and professional sports teams booking these flights. Capital's biggest charter customer was U.S. Steel.

A brochure heralded the benefits of the service:

Capital's Special Flight Service  
Promotes Playing Efficiency!

Many a game has been lost because players were tired and nervous from travel-fatigue. Capital's Special Flights are fast, clean-relaxing!

- Comfortable reclining chairs, delicious *complimentary meals*.
- Privacy which protects from curious crowds.
- Short travel time that saves more time for practice.
- Relaxation that gets players to important games at the peak of their playing efficiency.

This is travel at its **best**.<sup>25</sup>

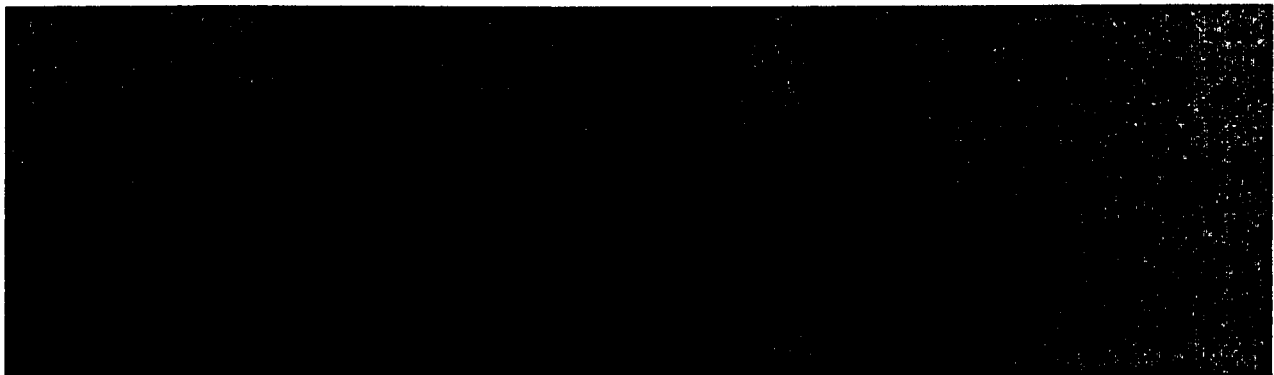
The staff of the Base Maintenance Shops, located at National Airport, were among the many people involved in the behind-the-scenes operations of Capital Airlines. Of course, a proper maintenance program was essential for providing the public with safe and dependable

air transportation. A Viscount overhaul alone required 20,000 hours of labor. To ensure that parts for this task were always readily available, Capital's warehouses at Duke and Telegraph Roads in Alexandria included a special Vickers-Armstrongs warehouse storing Viscount parts.

According to *Capitaliner*, this facility was a model of efficiency where any one of the 28,000 items stored there could be located in about 30 seconds.

The Maintenance Shops were virtually self-sufficient with departments specializing in areas such as radio and radar maintenance, upholstery, sheet metal work, propeller maintenance, engine overhaul, welding, tire changing and electrical system maintenance. Capital was also equipped to maintain ground equipment like baggage trucks and tow tractors.

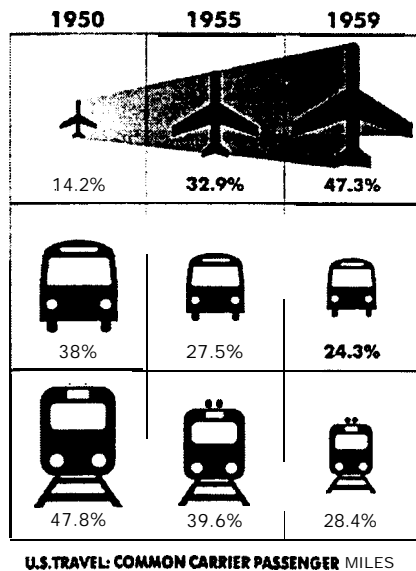
A facility designed specifically for Viscount maintenance was the Jet Engine Test Cell at National Airport. The first such facility of its kind, the cell was built by Capital in consultation with the engine manufacturer, Rolls Royce, during the summer of 1956.<sup>26</sup> Because of the high noise level produced by testing jet-powered engines, the cell was located in what was originally an isolated area of the airport and its structure was designed to help absorb sound. The alignment of the building also directed the jet exhaust and noise to the southeast, over the Potomac



The Viscount.  
(Courtesy of L. B. Boyd)

River and away from Alexandria.

The Test Cell had a three-part floor plan. The control room, maintenance area and small service and storage rooms were located in the central bay, while the actual testing was done in the outer bays. To do a test, an engine was mounted on a stand and technicians used a metal catwalk to attach and adjust test equipment cables. The temperature, air intake, fuel and oil pressure, horsepower and vibration levels of the engine were monitored and adjusted from the control room. The engines were fired for approximately four hours during the testing. Today, Capital's Jet Engine Test Cell is used for vehicle maintenance by Ogden Allied Aviation Services.



In just a decade, air transportation became the most frequent means of passenger travel. (Statistical information from *Facts & Figures about Air Transportation, 1960*)

In the late 1950s, Capital offered innovative fares and services to attract more passengers. The VIP Flights featured amenities at no extra cost such as steaks cooked to order, champagne, corsages for ladies, Dictaphones for businessmen and special baggage handling. The airline also promoted low cost fares with

appealing names such as “Festival Fares,” “Cardinal Coach” and “Fun Coach.” A ticket for the “Air Bus” service to Miami cost less than traveling there by car, bus or train.

As commercial aviation has evolved, so has the service provided for passengers in-flight. It was Boeing Air Transport (United Airlines’ predecessor) which introduced a new level of in-flight service when it hired female flight attendants, now known as the “Original Eight,” in 1930. Ever since they took to the skies, the title and role of the position has continued to change, reflecting the attitude of the times. While the attendants performed many necessary tasks, the airlines also recognized their essential role in conveying the image of the company. In addition to educational requirements, a potential stewardess had to look and behave a certain way in order to promote a wholesome, attractive and “All-American” image for the airlines. These women had to be unmarried, were typically between 20 and 30, under 5’6” tall and could weigh no more than 125 pounds.

PCA hired its first hostesses when it acquired Douglas DC-3s in 1940. The carrier named the attendants “Air Hostesses” whose role resembled that of “a charming hostess in the home.” Co-pilots had attended to the passengers on previous planes, but since DC-3s required more attention in the cockpit while accommodating more passengers, a full-time cabin attendant was necessary. Accordingly, food service was added when hostesses became part of the flight crew, reinforcing the idea that the passenger’s comfort was PCA’s primary concern. While other airlines required their stewardesses to be registered nurses, PCA was one of the first to eliminate the requirement and emphasize the service aspect of the job.

In the late 1950s, an African-American woman challenged accepted ideas about the hiring of airline hostesses. Patricia Banks, a graduate of an established flight attendant career school in New York City, filed a complaint with the State Commission Against Discrimination when



A Capital Hostess serves a meal aboard the Viscount.  
(Courtesy of L.B. Boyd)

Capital Airlines rejected her application to become a hostess. Capital employed Blacks as cleaners or porters, but not on flight crews. Although there were a few exceptions, this was typical of commercial airlines at the time.

Upon reviewing Banks' case, the Commission found her to have met all the job requirements and ordered the airline to hire her.<sup>28</sup> On April 1, 1960, *Capitaliner* reported that she was to complete her Capital hostess training and receive her wings in May. There were only **two** other black stewardesses with commercial airlines in 1960. Over the years, particularly after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, airline hiring policies have gradually resulted in a much more diversified workforce.

The discrimination suit was just one of several challenges Capital was forced to confront at the same time it was expanding routes and offering special fares. The confidence of the traveling public is essential to the success of commercial aviation. Sadly, despite Capital's long aviation experience, highly qualified pilots and vigilant maintenance, the airline was plagued with a series of fatal accidents beginning in the summer of 1957. On June 22, a DC-3 training flight stalled and went down at Clarksburg, Maryland. A Viscount stalled and crashed on April 6, 1958, as it was turning left for the final approach to the Tri-City Airport at Saginaw, Michigan. Just over six weeks later, a Maryland Air National Guard T-33 trainer collided with a Capital Viscount in midair at Brunswick, Maryland. On May 12 of the next year, Capital tragically had two major crashes the same day. A Constellation flight rolled off the far end of the runway at Charleston, West Virginia's Kanawha Airport, and turbulence caused by a thunderstorm near

Baltimore, Maryland caused a Viscount to crash. Then, on January 18, 1960, a Viscount en route from Washington to Norfolk went down in Holdcroft, Virginia.

Capital was having financial problems. There was profit potential from the new long-haul routes and use of larger equipment leased from another airline, but it could not be realized quickly enough to reverse the downward spiral. Revenue and passengers were lost when Capital was grounded by a thirty-eight day strike by maintenance personnel in late 1958. The Viscount service was popular, but costs were rising and the carrier fell behind in its payments to the airline's manufacturer **Vickers-Armstrongs**. In May of 1960, **Vickers** filed a foreclosure suit on the entire Viscount fleet. Capital also had not been able to sell old aircraft which would have helped to raise the revenue needed to purchase new equipment. Various plans to solve these problems were not successful. Management tried to keep a positive public image but news and aviation publications, as well as employees, began to question the company's leadership.<sup>29</sup>

In August of 1959, the Capital Shareholders Association had been formed by employees who were deeply concerned about the future of Capital Airlines. The Association's goal was to work with other stockholders and Capital's Board of Directors, on developing programs that would improve the airline and alleviate its financial problems.

Any person owning one or more shares of Capital voting stock was eligible for membership. The organization, headquartered at 610 Madison Street in Alexandria, grew to 2,500 members. Their president, senior pilot Charles E. Beatley, recalled the Association's efforts in an article in the *Capital Airlines Association Newsletter*:

'Nine of us sat down in my living room in 1959, creating a 'save Capital' organization....We made

critiques, (including one of 100 pages) and hand-delivered them to each member of Capital's Board....We knew we had to work fast — creating stockholders and setting up a survival fund for all Capital employees!"<sup>30</sup>

Eventually, Capital's financial picture became so bleak that the Association ran a stockholder proxy solicitation as a first step to oust some members of the board of directors and top management. According to *Aviation Week*, "Privately, a number of Capital officials conceded that the insurgents could be successful in capturing control of the company...."<sup>31</sup> The board responded by ousting chairman of the executive committee, Charles H. Murchison, and recalling a former board member, Thomas D. Neelands, Jr., to serve as chairman of the board.

The Association was ready to ask the Securities and Exchange Commission to call a special meeting for the reorganization of Capital's board when the plans to merge with United Airlines were announced. Capital was saved from bankruptcy.

According to Beatley, Neelands had been given the task of negotiating a merger with United. Beatley credits the Shareholders Association's influence for helping to ensure that Capital employees did not lose their jobs as a result of the airline's financial difficulties.

Capital Airlines Board Chairman Neelands and United Airlines President William A. Patterson announced the proposed merger at a Washington press conference on July 28, 1960. Over the next year, union negotiations and the approval of the boards of both companies, stockholders, and the Civil Aeronautics Board followed. One important asset Capital had to offer was close to 8,000 employees, with over 3,000 stationed at the airline's National Airport headquarters. With the exception of directors and some of the officers, Capital per-

sonnel were ensured of a position with the new United. On June 1, 1961, United assumed Capital's assets and liabilities and the schedules of the two airlines were combined into one system on July 1. It was the biggest airline merger to that date.

In reflecting on their experiences at Capital Airlines, former employees recollect a warm, close-knit organization where everybody seemed to know everyone else.

Being part of an early airline and participating in its growth brought employees together and made them feel like members of a family. Perhaps this unique camaraderie of the Capital employees was heightened when they shared the airline's troubled economic times in the late 1950s. *Capitaliner*, kept employees all over the Capital system informed of news, social events, marriages, births, retirements and sometimes gossip.

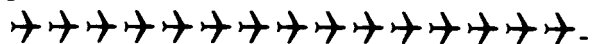
Events such as the popular annual picnic held at Fort Hunt, south of Alexandria, and the Fleet Club, an airline-wide social club, reinforced social ties. There were company softball teams, a bowling league, golf club, sports car club and boat club. If the frequency of reports in the newsletter is any indication, the company golf club and its annual tournament at Belle Haven Country Club were quite popular. In August, 1951, *Capitaliner* reported that both the men's and women's softball teams were entered in the Alexandria league and frequently appeared in twin bills at the city's stadium. As in other years, a team photograph is included with each of the athletes sporting shirts with the Capital insignia. The Capital family also reached out to the community through a variety of charity projects, such as working with Father John Schwartz of St. Mary's Church in Alexandria, to deliver toys to orphans at **Christmastime**.<sup>32</sup> After the merger with United the familiar spirit was not forgotten. The Capital Airlines family continues today through an alumni organization, the Capital Airlines Association.

This esprit de corps is evident in the following profiles of Capital Airlines employees.

Margaret “Jo” **Humbert** joined **Pennsylvania-Central Airlines** as a hostess in 1945, as soon as she reached the required age of 21. Originally planning to fly for just a year or two and return to school, Jo enjoyed her job so much that she remained at the airline and is still flying today.

**Humbert** worked through PCA’s transformation into Capital, then through the subsequent merger with United Airlines where she is the first stewardess in seniority. Her stability is rare in an occupation with an average turnover of 18 months. While most early stewardesses viewed the job as a temporary stop before marriage, school or a different job, **Humbert** made it her career. For many years, she was based at Washington National Airport and lived in Alexandria.

**Humbert’s** image graced full-page advertisements in Capital’s major campaign to publicize the Viscount after it was acquired in the mid-1950s. Nationally-run ads called attention to her unique status as the first airline hostess to fly a million jet-powered miles in the Viscount. The course of **Humbert’s** career has followed air travel’s dramatic changes over the last half-century. The comfortable ride on the 438-passenger Boeing 747 she now flies is a far cry from the bumpy, 21-seat Douglas DC-3 with unpressurized cabins on which she started.



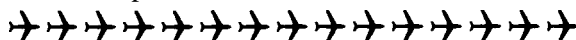
**George Paull** was a flight controller and dispatcher. In 1940, an early fascination with planes and radio communications led **Paull** to a job at the PCA Flight Control Center at the Allegheny County Airport. His job as a radio operator in the days before Air Traffic Control’s advanced tracking systems required a complicated, back-and-forth relay of information about a flight’s position between pilot, radio operator and flight dispatcher.

During World War II, **Paull** moved to Alexandria and became an instructor in PCA’s training

school for military flight radio operators and navigators at Washington National Airport. He left PCA in January, 1944 to serve in the Army Air Corps but returned after the war when PCA, expecting rapid expansion, summoned him back to the Flight Control Office at National Airport.

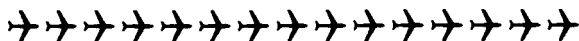
During Capital’s merger with United in 1961, **Paull** helped negotiate the combining of Capital and United dispatchers, continuing to work in Flight Dispatch at National through the process. He retired from United Airlines in 1984.

Through his activities as a Capital Airlines Association board member, he continues to enjoy the camaraderie that was an important element of his time at Capital.



Since her childhood, when she built model airplanes instead of playing with dolls, **Peggy Frank** wanted to work in aviation. In 1948, after her graduation from the Pittsburgh Institute of Aeronautics, she got a job with Capital Airlines. A secretary, she started out in the Purchasing Department at the National Airport headquarters office, but over the years worked in various departments such as Storerooms, System Line Maintenance and Dispatch. Frank experienced the variety of behind-the-scenes operations which kept the airline running smoothly.

When Capital merged with United Airlines in 1961, she stayed and retired in 1991. During a recent interview, Frank commented on missing the personal, small company feeling of working at Capital, which changed when the merger made United Airlines the largest domestic air carrier. She jumped at the chance to re-connect with old friends from Capital and became a founding member of the Capital Airlines Association. Today, she serves as the Association’s business manager.

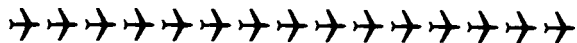


**Charles E. “Chuck” Beatley’s** interest in flying as a career began when he was elected president of the Flying Club at Ohio State University. **Beatley** joined PCA’s Military Transport Division as a pilot in 1943. After World War II, he continued

to fly for PCA, Capital Airlines and then United Airlines.

Beatley's best-known role at Capital was as an organizer. When Capital's financial problems threatened to bankrupt the airline, he helped establish the Capital Shareholders Association. The Association put pressure on management, which helped bring about what Beatley considered the best of all available solutions, the merger with United in 1961.

After becoming a national officer of the Air Line Pilots Association and a senior pilot at United Airlines, Beatley entered public office with his election to Alexandria's City Council in 1966. The next year he was elected Mayor, serving from 1968 - 1976 and again from 1979 - 1985. He retired from United in 1976. In the early 1980s, Beatley helped create the Capital Airlines Association. He is on the Board of Directors.



As a young man in Newcastle, Pennsylvania, with no funds for college but employed in a secure job as a car mechanic, Jim Foster was happy to be right where he was. His mother, however, encouraged him to "go for the best and become an aircraft mechanic." After completing the program at the Clearfield Aviation Institute, he joined Capital Airlines in 1951 as a mechanic at Washington National Airport.

When a friend offered to teach him to fly, he took advantage of the opportunity and, after some lessons at nearby Hybla Valley Airport, was able to earn his Private Pilot's license just before reporting for the Draft. After returning to his job at Capital after serving in Korea, Foster worked the 4:00 p.m. to midnight shift so that he could fly at Beacon Field during the day to get his Commercial and Instrument Ratings. In 1956, a last-minute opening for a pilot came up. Foster went down to the hangar, packed up his tools and returned the next day as a pilot-trainee for the DC-3.

According to a recent *Capital Airlines Association Newsletter*, Foster's story "is that of a young kid who comes from a small town, with no special academic background, without the advantage of military flight training, [who] can, with hard work and determination, go from a local garage mechanic to the left seat of a B-747 for one of the world's most respected airlines."<sup>33</sup> Foster continued flying for United until his retirement in 1991. Today, he is president of the Capital Airlines Association.

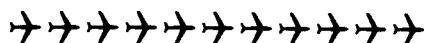
The merger with Capital made United Airlines the largest U. S. commercial carrier. Since then, United has grown to be one of the world's largest passenger airlines. It has almost 87,000 employees and is the largest majority employee-owned company in the world. Each day, United's 2,238 flights carry approximately 223,670 customers. It flies throughout North America, South America, Asia, Central America, Australia, New Zealand, Europe and **India**.<sup>34</sup> Commercial aviation has clearly become a necessity since Clifford Ball started his mail service in 1927.

Twenty years after Capital merged with United Airlines, Charles Beatley contacted Peggy Frank. With the help of several others, they rounded up the names and addresses of former Capital employees and planned a gathering. Alexandria was important to Capital, so it was fitting that the first annual Capital Airlines Association reunion picnic was held at the City's Fort Ward Park on October 1, 1981. The event was an overwhelming success when over 900 people showed up to reminisce and reconnect. The picnic, now held at Jones Point Park, has become an annual event over the last 16 years, with as many as 1,300 attending. Members keep in touch by sending anecdotes and photos to the Association's quarterly newsletter.

In a recent oral history interview, George Paul commented about Alexandria and the Capital family:

"Alexandria has been very important to....Capital Airlines....It was home for

many people on the airline....and it has become our home now that we're holding reunions every year....We were a pioneering airline group, we had the advantage of getting into the airline industry when it was just a babe and we helped it grow. Every one of us contributed to helping to build the airline and we worked closely together....It was great to come back to Alexandria and relive some of those experiences by talking them over with people that we worked with back those many years ago-its a camaraderie... it's a closeness that never ended..."35

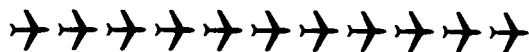


Mercy Quintos, Emily Soapes and Paul Garver contributed to this article.

#### About the Author:

Kristin B. Lloyd curated the exhibition *Flying The Capital Way*. She is curator and assistant director of The Lyceum, Alexandria's History Museum. She is also Secretary of the Alexandria Historical Society. At the Lyceum, she participates in exhibition planning and development, directs collections management, oversees educational programming for children and adults and assists in the administration of the museum.

Ms. Lloyd has also worked as an associate curator at two other City-owned historical sites, initially at Gadsby's Tavern Museum and later at Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site. Ms. Lloyd has a Bachelor of Arts in History from Wittenberg University, Springfield, OH. She has also done coursework in American Studies at American University, Washington, D.C., and has gained experience in historical editing as an intern with the National Trust for Historic Preservation.



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Father John Schwartz of St. Mary's Church, Alexandria, helps Captain Dick Collins and Co-Pilot Hunter Perkinson load Christmas toys to be delivered to an orphanage, December 1951. (Courtesy of L. B. Boyd)

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