

# Breaking One More Barrier In the Blue Yonder

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**It looked like it was planned,** but it wasn't. And considering the presidential election outcome last November, it shouldn't have been a surprise—well, part of it, anyway.

"It" was Atlantic Southeast Airlines Delta Connection Flight 5202, the first scheduled revenue flight of a U.S. airline flown by an all-female African American crew. Capt. Rachele Jones and F/O Stephanie Grant, accompanied by flight attendants Diana Galloway and Robin Rogers, flew a CRJ-700 from Atlanta, Ga., to Nashville, Tenn., and back on February 12—appropriately enough, in the heart of Black History Month and on the birthday of Abraham Lincoln.

Appropriately, but not deliberately. Just 30 minutes before the airplane was set to leave, the scheduled first officer fell ill, and Scheduling called Grant to take her place, rounding out the foursome of black women "manning" the flight. And although the trip was a group milestone, perhaps more important to remember is that, individually, these women each set a goal for themselves, pursued it, and achieved it.

Rachele Jones is one of only 10 black female airline captains in the country, according to the Organization of Black Airline Pilots, a statistic that partially explains why it has taken this long—88 years since Bessie Coleman became the first black American to obtain a pilot's license—to assemble such a crew. Back in 1921 Coleman had to go to France to get her flying lessons because aviation schools in America repeatedly turned down her applications.

Coleman is an inspiration to Jones, and so is her mother, who "raised me to believe I can do anything I want to do in life," she said. "I couldn't have gotten where I am today without her prayers



**ABOVE: Capt. Rachele Jones, left, and F/O Stephanie Grant.**

**RIGHT: From top, F/O Grant, Capt. Jones, and flight attendants Diana Galloway and Robin Rogers.**

and encouragement." But when she was working as a Delta customer service agent in Atlanta, it wasn't until a close friend put the idea in her head of becoming a pilot that she considered the possibility. "Maybe he saw something I didn't," she said during a crew conference call from Atlanta.

As a military brat—her mother was in the Navy—Jones grew up "everywhere," so she was used to shifting gears. She took her friend's suggestion, got her training and her certificates, was employed by her first choice, Atlantic Southeast, in January 2005, and joined ALPA a month later.

"I love my job," she said. "I look forward to going to work each day. Every day is different—the destination, the passengers, the weather."

Stephanie Grant, from Sumter, S.C., has flying in her blood. An uncle



in the Air Force introduced her to airplanes. In college, when she was getting her commission to go into the Army, she wanted to be a pilot, but it didn't work out.

"I had another relative who flew with American Airlines," she said. "Five years ago, after a conversation with him, I found myself stepping out on faith and going to flight school."

That's another coincidence. The relative was her cousin, Herman Samuels, who was a member of the first all-African American *male* crew to fly for

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# Bessie Coleman

Bessie Coleman was born in Atlanta (Texas, not Georgia) in 1892, one of 13 children in a family struggling against the racism of the time. She was intelligent, finishing eighth grade at the top of her class, but had to go to work as a laundress to save for further education. The money only lasted a semester at a preparatory school, so she went back to laundering, but got fed up and moved to Chicago, where she enrolled in a beauty school.

Her charm and her skill as a manicurist earned her friends among the city's wealthier black citizens. When her longing for more excitement turned her ambitions toward the career of aviator, she had to go as far as France, under the patronage of those friends, to be accepted at a flight school. She completed the training, causing a stir when she returned to America as the first black licensed pilot in the United States. But she realized that to make a living, she needed training as a stunt flyer. Again, she sailed to Europe for tutelage and came back with confidence and determination.

Coleman first appeared in an American air show on Sept. 3, 1922, near New York, and 6 weeks later gave a remarkable demonstration of death-defying maneuvers for an appreciative crowd at the



cosponsor, took spectators for rides in a pair of two-seater planes.

As she gained fame and fans, Coleman also endured many struggles, financial and otherwise, especially in her attempt to open a flying school. At the same time, she traveled around the country to give lectures at schools and churches to encourage young people to take up a career in aviation.

In May 1926, she was flying with her mechanic to prepare for an air show in Jacksonville, Fla., when a wrench slid into the controls, sending the Army surplus plane out of control. Both were killed. Bessie Coleman was 34.

"Because of Bessie Coleman," wrote Lieutenant William J. Powell in *Black Wings*, "we have overcome that which was worse than racial barriers. We have overcome the barriers within ourselves and dared to dream." 🌐

a U.S. airline—for American Airlines in 1986.

Grant was hired by Atlantic Southeast, which she chose after a friend praised the airline's training department, in 2008. "They want to hire the best," she said, "and if you can get through the rigorous interview process, you can get through the training." She did, and loves her work. Like Jones, she is an ALPA member.

ALPA's president, Capt. John Prater, commented: "This milestone is a historic event that, by being unplanned, demonstrates some excellent qualities of our profession: pilots are proud of what they do, and they are judged by

their ability to fly airplanes, period."

Robin Rogers, a native of Atlanta, had other ideas when she was first mapping out her future.

"I wanted to be a social worker, and I was kind of doing that before I came to Atlantic Southeast," she said. "I was working at a day-care center, and one day a guy came in [to pick up his child], and he looked so good, so polished, I was really impressed. He was a flight attendant. And he looked like me."

That combination—well put together, professional, African American—pointed Rogers in a new direction. Nine years ago, she started a job with

Checkerboard Airdrome, now Midway Airport. After the show, she and Dave Behncke, founder and president of ALPA and the event's

the airline as a flight attendant, and hasn't looked back. In fact, you could say that as a flight attendant, she still has the opportunity to practice some of the social worker's skills.

Diana Galloway was born in Manchester, England, and took her first flight when she was 6, to Barbados. From there her family moved to Brooklyn, where she grew up. Her first ambition was to be a pediatrician, but she changed her mind.

"We traveled a lot, and I looked at the flight attendants and thought, 'This is a good job.'" It seemed glamorous to her, and it offered the chance to see the world.

But there was a hitch. She was in her 20s, married, and had started a family, and "my husband wasn't having any of it." So Galloway bided her time, and when she was 40, "I just did it. And he was fine with it."

Like Rogers, she has been with Atlantic Southeast for 9 years. Both are members of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA.

"I wouldn't have any other job," Galloway said. "You get to meet a lot of different types of people, and it has a great schedule that gives me a lot of time to spend with my family."

Although having a black woman at the controls may take some passengers by surprise, Grant said she hasn't had any unpleasantness from anyone.

"I think we're moving forward to a time where it doesn't matter" whether a person is black or white, she said. "No matter what you want to be, you have to work hard at it. This was our dream. I'm proud to be in a country where anything is possible."

Galloway added, "Besides the flight's being a monumental moment for women and African Americans, we are now gifted with being role models for young girls of all colors." And echoing Grant: "Anything is possible." 🌐