

S2 E6 A Competent Performance EDITED-aup

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SPEAKERS

Enid Otun



Enid Otun 00:01

Hello, and welcome to season two of, If women were meant to fly, the sky would be pink, Episode Six, A Competent Performance. I'm Enid Otun. In this episode, I meet the shell training Captain slash operations manager to discuss my Bristow shell command. A small ceremony is held to award me my four bars. And I become a shell captain, the first woman to achieve this in Nigeria. And I come up against the bureaucracy that tries to take away what it just gave you. As the command stripes were placed on my shoulders, I started to tear up. All this work, and all my life to this point had been worth it. It had been a hard road. But that wasn't an issue. I had always expected that it would be, nothing that is worth fighting for is easy. And the more of a challenge it becomes, the more worthwhile it feels when you finally get there. I have been undergoing tests and assessments for the last few months with every conceivable scenario thrown in for good measure. It was hard, but a useful education at this stage of the transition. I was breaking down several barriers at the same time, and the pressure was immense. By the time I was asked to present to the managing pilots office one afternoon, early in 1992, I was exhausted and could do no more to ensure the next phase of my working life. With the Shell Aviation Manager and my Fixed Wing Chief Pilot in the room, they began to present my case for a command. Most of the decisions had already been made before I walked into the room and now the spotlight was on me. It had been agreed that I had both reached and exceeded the requirements for a command, and although Shell had not been here before, with a co

pilot rising through the ranks to obtain just that, they were eventually satisfied that I was there. The Shell Aviation Manager addressed me directly with my accomplishments and congratulated me on being the first copilot to have made the transition. He also pointed out that I could be very proud of myself for also being the first woman to do this for this particular operation. My chief pilot addressed me next and gave me a glowing recommendation. This was personal and professional, and I had a lot to thank him for, for fighting my corner. He produced a set of Captains epaulettes of the gold variety, and walked around to stand behind me. In one swift move, he removed the three bar epauletts that I already wore, and replaced them with my captain's bars. The congratulations were effusive and genuine, and I allowed myself a moment. The following week went by in a bit of a blur. I was back at the flying club at the weekend and with so many students now booked in with me, I just didn't have the time to reflect deeply on my promotion. But by the time I did reflect, I couldn't decide whether I felt any different or not. In some ways, I felt much more like a proper adult. Along with my promotion, my personal life had changed as well. I was in a relationship, albeit secretive and destined to stay that way for some time. Only my closest friends knew and, and that was okay. Most people saw us only as friends anyway, and that was probably because their minds would not have been able to handle anything else. A bit like I'm always a boy because I couldn't possibly be a woman and a pilot in my life seemed to complete at this point. But I didn't really recognize it. I just didn't have those required clues to guide me through adulthood from a dysfunctional childhood. I still struggled with anger and bitterness and this was not necessarily against anyone externally. I was the Tasmanian devil inside. However, with my new four bars of gold set firmly on my shoulders, I started this new phase in earnest. Everyone now called me Captain, and sometimes had to remind me that they were actually addressing me. I was now rostered as a full Shell Captain, and would either fly with another Captain or senior first officer. As I was a new captain, it was good practice and procedure to help me fly with a more senior copilot. Senior co pilots were more experienced and therefore much more likely to pick up on any mistakes and more confident in raising issues with the captain. Now, this in no way took anything away from our very competent, less experienced first officers. It was just that, a matter of experience. My first flight as a newly promoted captain was exciting. I took my responsibility seriously and was probably a little over the top when it came to getting my ducks all lined up in a row. I checked and re-checked everything that came my way that day and things took longer than they should. The early morning departure from Lagos was an event. And I have to say that I was very touched when the dispatcher announced to the room full of passengers, that history was being made that morning. Some were shocked, but most were congratulatory and impressed. The first sector was uneventful with a few areas of weather avoidance, followed by a landing in Warri. Someone had advised that this epic making flight would be arriving, and we seem to have a good number of extra people in the vicinity to observe the landing. Luckily, I was having a good day. The early morning

fog had dissipated and the wind was calm. So I managed to kiss the deck on arrival for all to see. My customary walk around inspection of the aircraft after I'd completed the tech log entries and dispatch paperwork, was a spectacle. And it seemed as though I had a million pairs of eyes on me as I made sure that my aircraft was air worthy. The departure from Warri was always interesting, as the runway intersected the road and so it had to be closed whilst we taxied out and turned around to make sure that we had every inch of available runway surface for takeoff. We had a huge audience. News travels fast. Our second stop of the day was Port Harcourt, and usually if the weather is good, a technically straightforward visual approach is flown. And this was the case as we arrived. The crew would spend the next six hours on the ground here, either at the local hotel, which was five minutes drive from the airport, or at the shell camp in downtown Port Harcourt. I decided that we would go to the camp and get lunch followed by some downtime at our allocated accommodation. And on this occasion, I would be spending my time in the captain's quarters which was a little surreal. I usually had a well rehearsed ritual when I had this amount of downtime, a lot of which was spent reading my favorite Russian novels. However, on this occasion, I was working my way through the aircraft flight manual, even though I knew it well enough already. Thinking back now I realized that this was a natural reaction to something new for me. I wanted an information overload, just in case anything should go wrong. I had to fly all the sectors that first day, standard procedure dictated that as a new captain. By the time we returned to Lagos after a very uneventful flight, I was more exhausted than usual. Our senior engineers came out to meet the flight, as did my chief pilot. I was touched by the concern and genuine excitement from the ground crew, as well as my operations staff who wanted to make sure that I'd had a good day as a new captain. My colleagues were a great support to me in those early days. If you think about it, they had known me since I first made an appearance in the hangar as a scrawny eight stone youngster all those years before. Without help and nurturing and despite very challenging circumstances, I had emerged against all the odds as a reasonably polished, proficient, and sensible adult and pilot. The next phase of my working life would begin in earnest and although I didn't know it yet, I would have some challenging, insightful, frightening, intense and educational experiences ahead of me. The next few weeks would be busy. I was still teaching at the Legos flying club and the number of students had increased substantially. In order to keep flying commercially and teaching, I had to hire an additional flight instructor to help out. This would be in the form of a good friend that I had trained with in the United States, and who was also now a successful pilot in Lagos, having spent a number of years as an instructor in Zaria, in the North of Nigeria. We had met whilst at the airline Training Institute during our flight training and become firm friends. He was tall and handsome, and as I would learn later, had a crush on me. Given that feelings like that were alien to me at the time, I brushed it off as infatuation. After all, I was not the kind of girl anyone went out with. Well, that was how I felt at the time. And I was actually okay with it. My self esteem was in poor condition in those days. We hung out

together, flew together and suffered self doubt together about our ability to become commercial pilots. He was an absolute gentleman, kind and thoughtful, and a good friend. His interest continued after we returned to Nigeria, I just didn't know how to tell him I was gay or that I didn't want to pursue a romantic relationship. So I kept him at arm's length. It sounds callous, but I was still reluctant to divulge a lot of things, even to friends. He seemed okay with that at the time. And I didn't really want to dig any further into his feelings or risk losing his friendship, so I didn't discuss it. But it was great to have someone I trusted take up some of the excess work at the flying club. It meant that I could spend some time trying to figure out where I wanted to go next with my career. There had been some discussion at the company about moving into the charter market, which was taking off quite rapidly at the time. All our fixed wing work up to this point was contracted to one or more oil companies. Setting up a charter operation alongside our contracted work, however, would require the right aircraft. Several months after my promotion, I was called to a meeting with our Lagos Fixed Wing Operations Managing Director. I had heard some rumblings about the transfer of a Gatwick based fixed wing aircraft to the Lagos operation, the Beechcraft Super King Air B200, which was an executive twin turboprop, nine seater aircraft. Ours was the seven stroke eight seater version, because we had a rear baggage and utility area, complete with a toilet that also served as an extra eight seat. Captain John Black, our area managing director wanted to discuss whether or not I would be open to taking on the management of a new charter department using the King Air, I would have my own office, dedicated staff and the opportunity to choose my flight crew. Suffice to say that I didn't need any time at all to think about it. I jumped at the chance. It would take a few months to plan but I would be making another trip to our head office in Redhill to complete my training on the King Air, obtain a new type rating and assist in ferrying the aircraft back to Lagos. Thank you for listening. As always, your reviews and comments are very much appreciated. Thank you to Lucy Ashby for the editing of this episode. If you would like to ask a question or make a comment. Please do so on our social media sites. We're on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter or send us an email. Our email address is theskyispinkpilot@gmail.com or visit our website www.skyispink.co.uk In the next episode, planning for the new charter DEP takes shape. I set off to the UK for my King Air Training and ferry flight. After my return I set about choosing staff and flight crew for my new department. Thank you and goodbye