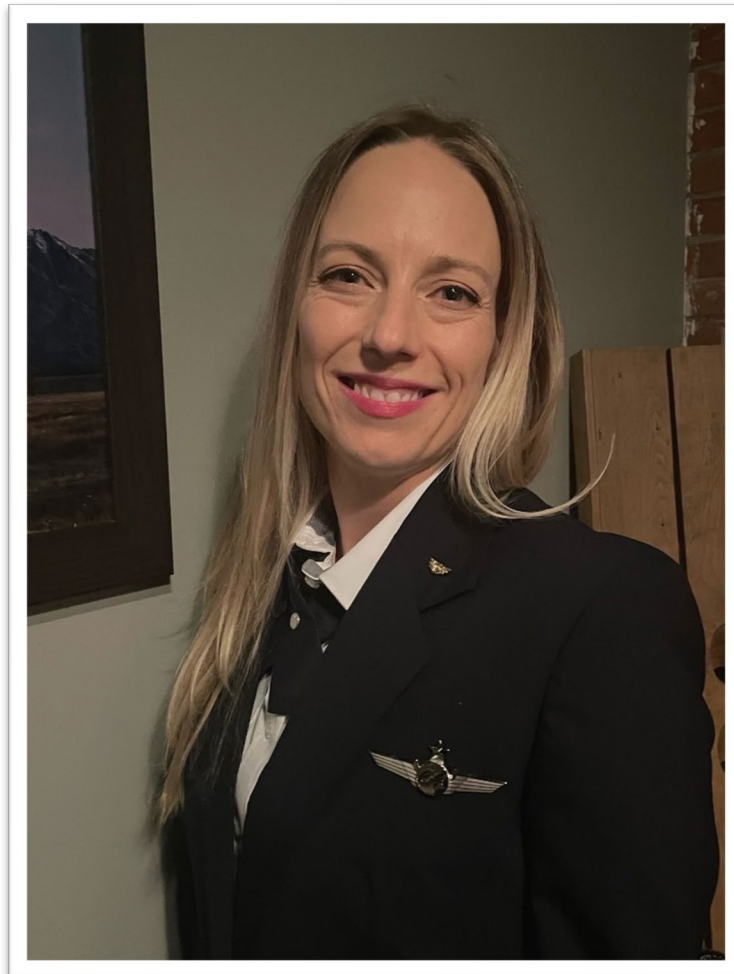


Team Member Spotlight: First Officer Mary Catherine (MC) Russell



The month of March is Women's History Month, and we're taking the opportunity to share the incredible stories of just a few of the standout members of our diverse team. This week we're featuring First Officer, Mary Catherine Russell – A successful career in the friendly skies has taken "MC" all over the world, on *both sides of the flight deck* – as a Flight Attendant and a Pilot! Read on to hear some of MC's story...



What was it that first interested you in aviation?

While I was in college, I wasn't sure of the career path I ultimately wanted for myself. My Aunt is a Flight Attendant at Southwest, and at the time my uncle was working as a Pilot for Continental Airlines. After I graduated, my Aunt and I started talking and she suggested I go into aviation as a Flight Attendant. The industry was booming at the time - I was interviewed, hired and put into training within a month at Continental Airlines!

I've always enjoyed traveling - so I saw the immediate opportunity with aviation allowing me to "work as a vacation." As a crew member, not only are we getting paid to visit different places and explore different cities, but it allows us more opportunity to do so on our own time too. Over the years I've benefited from that lifestyle and taken the opportunity to explore, both domestically and internationally: I've visited 36 countries and been on every continent except Antarctica!

What did your journey to becoming a pilot look like?

I was a Flight Attendant for a total of 16 years (first at Continental then at United) and around the 10-year mark I realized that though I was comfortable, I wanted a new challenge. I was considering going back to school when a pilot asked me during one of our trips, "Why aren't you sitting up front?" I realized I didn't have an answer...and the more I thought about it, the more I realized that becoming a pilot would be the next step for me!

After completing my discovery flight at my local airport, I committed to earning my private pilot license (and waved goodbye to my dreams of a new kitchen) and worked towards earning my ratings over the next couple of years. That's how I started vectoring towards being on the other side of the door, and I'm excited to finally be reaching my goal and starting my Initial Operating Experience as an Airline Pilot.

Because I had a career at United as a mainline Flight Attendant, I was already aware of CommutAir and the role at the regional level. I continued working as a Flight Attendant for my "day job" as I took lessons, built hours and got the credentials required to apply as an Airline Transport Pilot. I was finishing up right as United announced the Aviate program.





The timing worked out really well for me to be able to successfully apply to the program and then transition to CommutAir to start flying!

What's been your experience as a woman in aviation – on both sides of the flight deck?

I am very fortunate that aviation is such a community. When I first started my pilot journey, it was just a handful of us – it wasn't a huge flight school like a college. We all knew each other, hung out together, and it was that kind of support system I have come to expect in aviation. When you're away from home, some of the only people that can help you are your crew members. We take care of each other if someone gets sick or if something happens back home. I'm grateful to have found that community across my aviation career!



We have a long way to go in terms of representation in the industry overall – New challenges can be tough, but you will find encouragement, mentorship and support on your path in aviation. We have more advocacy groups than ever to support the industry like Women in Aviation International and FAST.

What advice would you give to young women interested in a career in aviation?

There are so many avenues to take that first step. Spend time in the aviation community itself – even if that's just visiting your local community airport. The veterans in our industry are really open to mentorship and sharing their personal learning experiences. You can also find someone who's maybe just one or two steps ahead of you in the process to act as a mentor and help you along the way – and that goes for all areas of the industry, not just pilots or flight attendants!

Grow your radius. It's amazing to be able to experience the different colors, vibrations, cultures, and people in the world! Everywhere I've gone the people are welcoming and friendly and want to hear your story, as well as share their own. Meeting different people helps you grow...and aviation offers you the opportunity to broaden your horizons in so many ways!