MIDDLE EASTERN WOMEN PILOTS KEEP THEIR EYES ON THE SKIES

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Alia Twal, a first officer who flies for Royal Jordanian Airlines, is a trailblazer in her home country of Jordan. From an early age Twal found her true calling: she knew she would learn to fly and become a pilot.

“I was 16 years old when I decided I wanted to be a pilot,” she recalled for Runway Girl Network. “We had a career day in school and I chose to attend the aviation lecture. I never knew before that women were allowed to become pilots. I learned that there were already four women pilots in Jordan and one is still flying. That’s the day I knew I would be nothing other than a pilot.”

She was convinced but her parents were not. “It took me a year to do. But then the day I wore my uniform [and] they were touched; they even cried,” she says.

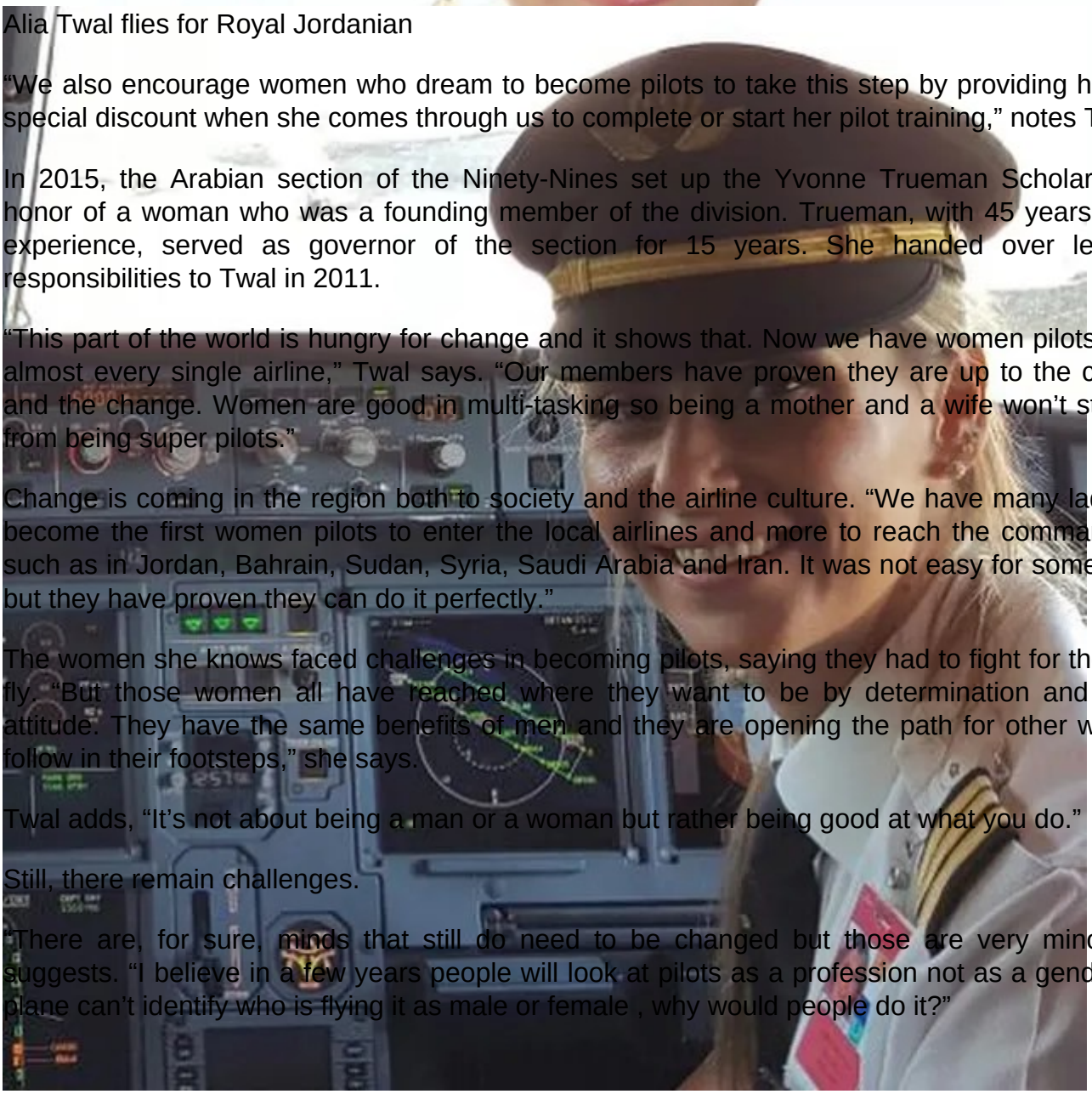
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Alia Twal First Officer

Twal, who has 3,500 hours on the Airbus 330, is head of the Arabian section of the Ninety-Nines, International Organization of Women Pilots whose goal is to promote aviation though education, scholarship and support for other women who share their passion for flight. Over the past two years, membership in the Arabian section has jumped to 98 women – one member short of '99', Twal points out.

"Our aim in the Arabian section is to spread to the world what women can achieve in this part of the world," she says. "We have many pioneers in the aviation world and many who have achieved the title of being the first. We had women flying as early as the 1960s, conquering everything from gliders to jets. And as I always like to say, this is only the beginning."

The international group was founded in 1929 by 99 women pilots with fabled pilot Amelia Earhart as the first president. Earhart's motto, "fly for the fun of it" remains foremost in the minds of all the women in the group.



Alia Twal flies for Royal Jordanian

"We also encourage women who dream to become pilots to take this step by providing her with a special discount when she comes through us to complete or start her pilot training," notes Twal.

In 2015, the Arabian section of the Ninety-Nines set up the Yvonne Trueman Scholarships, in honor of a woman who was a founding member of the division. Trueman, with 45 years of flying experience, served as governor of the section for 15 years. She handed over leadership responsibilities to Twal in 2011.

"This part of the world is hungry for change and it shows that. Now we have women pilots flying in almost every single airline," Twal says. "Our members have proven they are up to the challenge and the change. Women are good in multi-tasking so being a mother and a wife won't stop them from being super pilots."

Change is coming in the region both to society and the airline culture. "We have many ladies who become the first women pilots to enter the local airlines and more to reach the command stage such as in Jordan, Bahrain, Sudan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran. It was not easy for some of them but they have proven they can do it perfectly."

The women she knows faced challenges in becoming pilots, saying they had to fight for the right to fly. "But those women all have reached where they want to be by determination and a smart attitude. They have the same benefits of men and they are opening the path for other women to follow in their footsteps," she says.

Twal adds, "It's not about being a man or a woman but rather being good at what you do."

Still, there remain challenges.

"There are, for sure, minds that still do need to be changed but those are very minor," Twal suggests. "I believe in a few years people will look at pilots as a profession not as a gender. If the plane can't identify who is flying it as male or female , why would people do it?"

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