



Olivia Cornwell in her navy-blue TAA hostess hat that she wore 70 years ago, aged 26, and (inset) her pin, gifted by Olympian Jesse Owens.



Badge of honour

Asking about a tiny Olympic pin unearthed a mum's stories of a golden year spent flying in the friendly way.

STORY BY JANE CORNWELL PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER TARASIUK

FOR DECADES, a tiny Olympic badge, bearing the five rings and the US shield, sat in a glass display cabinet in our home in Mooroolbark, in Melbourne's eastern suburbs, beside my mother's navy-blue air hostess hat. The cabinet is now in her lounge in Montrose. I always knew the badge was there. I just didn't know its story.

One day, while visiting from London, I was looking through the memorabilia on the shelves when I asked her about it.

"Jesse Owens gave it to me," she said.

My mother, Olivia Cornwell, is now 96. In 1956, she was Olivia Hudson, 26, a Trans Australia Airlines (TAA) air hostess renting a room in Alma Road, Caulfield North. Jesse Owens was in Melbourne for the Olympics as the United States Ambassador of Sports, appointed by then US president Dwight D. Eisenhower. He was already an international legend: at the 1936 Berlin Games, he won four gold medals in track and field, setting Olympic records and helping to shatter the myth of Aryan athletic supremacy.

On a flight from Melbourne to Sydney, he got talking to my mother. Before the flight was over, he had given her an official US delegation badge, a small

token of the Olympic tradition of pin trading and goodwill. "We'd had a long chat," she smiles. The pin was one of the memories she kept from that year.

Australia was changing. Television had just arrived. Waves of European migrants were reshaping the character of the major cities. The 1956 Melbourne Olympics, the first Games ever held in the southern hemisphere, were the country's grand debut on the world stage.

And TAA, only 10 years old, was at the heart of it.

Owens was just one of the many remarkable passengers my mother flew during her year with TAA, aboard rumbling DC-3s and sleek British Vickers Viscounts: then-prime minister Robert Menzies and his wife, Dame Pattie Menzies; Labor leader Arthur Calwell; Indigenous leader Douglas Nicholls; actors, dignitaries, graziers and more. But before she could fly them, there was the interview. Then there was the training.

After returning from two months overseas travelling from Sydney to the UK and Europe and back via the Suez Canal on the SS Oronsay, she was working as a preschool teacher and feeling isolated ("I only met mothers and kids") when she saw a magazine story about a TAA hostess.

"I loved the uniform and the idea of travelling around Australia and meeting people," she says. "I rang TAA. They invited me into town to see them. I wore a tweed outfit and a beret I'd got in Paris and sat in front of these six men in suits, chattering my head off, as I did in those days. The next thing I was being fitted for the uniform by an awful old tailor bloke who was patting us everywhere while breathing heavily. That was pretty disgusting."

Olivia was 5 foot 3 inches, in keeping with the airline's strict height requirements of five foot two to six inches. She wasn't married, which was another stipulation. Her boyfriend Alan, my late dad, would pick her up from Essendon Airport in his pale green Morris Minor, with its pop-out indicator arms.

She spent weeks on the ground learning drills, practising smiling and pouring tea just so from a heavy silver teapot. She was a face of the "friendly way" as TAA's advertising slogan promised, on flights that traversed the continent.

"We crossed the Flinders Ranges, whose rock formations looked like a giant mixing bowl," she wrote to her parents in Point Lonsdale (she has the letter). "We touched down at Tennant Creek, where airport officials wore khaki shorts and knee-length socks. It is wet season up north and the land beneath us on the way to Darwin was covered in rivers, lakes and lush growth; the grass was six feet tall."

After a bumpy DC-3 flight from Melbourne to Hobart, she reached into an overhead locker and passed then-PM Menzies his brown fedora. On a different flight, she addressed his wife as Mrs Menzies, then apologised. "Does it matter?" responded Dame Menzies, sweetly.

She recalls Arthur Calwell as stern and bespectacled, perhaps smoking a cigarette. In Alice Springs, there was a midnight chat on the tarmac, under a blanket of stars, with Douglas Nicholls, an athlete, pastor, civil rights activist and proud Yorta Yorta man, and a younger Indigenous aide. "Just the three of us, waiting for the plane to land, chatting pleasantly in the dark with the airport locked up and everyone gone home for the night," my mother recalls.

Hostesses were not supposed to fraternise with pilots. Still, Olivia has stories of a captain driving the cabin crew in a jeep to see the wildflowers carpeting the coast north of Perth.

She also remembers the risks. One plane landed safely in Hobart after an engine failed. Another overshot the runway in Melbourne and collided with a bitumen spreader. "We went out down the slides. There was a baby sitting on her mother's lap, looking very goggle-eyed."

The glamour began to wear off. "I didn't like being called late at night and having to catch the bus or train in my uniform," she says. "I'd begun to feel like a waitress in the sky. I started getting airsick. Besides, I wanted to marry your father."

And that she did, leaving TAA after one golden year. The pin stayed with her for the next seven decades. On my last visit, she gave it to me. I know its story now. ■