

SKY'S THE LIMIT

Melbourne's Georgia Weeks is following a childhood passion for aviation as Australia's first female search-and-rescue jet pilot

MARGARET AMBROSE



FLYING low over volatile seas off the coast of Victoria, it isn't immediately apparent to the crew of the jet that the commercial vessel below is in trouble — except that AMSA, the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, has received a distress signal, but hasn't been able to achieve further contact.

But now that the Challenger jet has a visual, the crew's training and protocols kick in.

The two search-and-rescue officers, who until now have been working as observers, move to the back of the jet to become dispatchers. The pilot uses the co-ordinates of the distressed vessel to establish a holding pattern and provides observations on the weather and sea conditions to the airborne mission co-ordinator beside them, who then passes that information on to the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre.

When the jet is 200m behind the vessel, the crew dispatches the first pack containing satellite telephones and radio equipment. It's far enough away that the pack won't hit the vessel — a scenario that could potentially cause further damage to the ship as well as the pack

— and the pilots have calculated that currents will carry it straight to the vessel.

Just then, the rescue helicopters, having been provided the coordinates by the search-and-rescue team in the jet, appear in the distance, ready to winch the passengers on the vessel to safety.

Being a search-and-rescue pilot is dangerous work in ever-changing conditions. But if you ask Georgia Weeks, 33, Australia's first female jet search-and-rescue pilot, that's why she loves it.

At any given moment, Weeks says, a call can come through from AMSA and her team, based at Essendon Airport, will drop what they're doing and race to the assistance of a vessel in distress.

"We're at a current state of readiness," Weeks says.

AMSA is the authority responsible for search-and-rescue co-ordination in Australia, and Cobham Aviation Services, the country's third-largest aviation company behind Qantas and Virgin, is contracted by AMSA to conduct search-and-rescue missions over an area of nearly 53 million sq km.

That's a rescue region covering almost one-10th of the Earth's surface.

There are also search-and-rescue aircraft based in Cairns and Perth. Each special-mission aircraft is equipped with cutting-edge technology, including the latest-generation sensors, visual detection and ranging cameras, high-vision windows, and broadband satellite communication, which allows real-time sharing of video, audio and images with AMSA's Joint Rescue Coordination Centre.

This technology, Weeks says, enables AMSA's search-and-rescue teams to essentially become the eyes and ears of a rescue operation as it unfolds.

The work performed by Weeks and her team is varied and every situation unique. Search-and-rescue missions can include looking for missing people, locating vessels that activate distress beacons, and dispatching survival equipment to ships in trouble.

The Challenger jet makes it invaluable in locating vessels in distress, she says.

"Helicopters can't stay in the air for too long — only about two hours — whereas we can stay out for a very long time," she says.

THE NICE PART OF THIS JOB IS THE DYNAMIC ENVIRONMENT

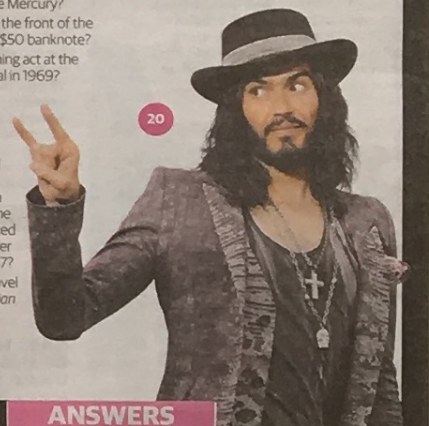
"Because of the size of Australia, we go out and find the ship that's in distress, and then once we have a precise location, that's when the helicopters can go out.

"Sometimes we will be instructed to directly intervene, dropping supplies like life rafts to a vessel in distress. Sometimes we will go and provide communications for other people who are doing the rescue."

Although she is the first female jet search-

SUPERQUIZ

- Which Australian state has a black swan image on a yellow background on its flag?
- What is the chemical symbol for phosphorous?
- What is the surname of the family that runs International Rescue in 1960s animated TV series *Thunderbirds*?
- James McCulloch was premier of which Australian state in the 1860s?
- What creature was the now-extinct huia?
- In which city were the first Australian 5c coins (1966) produced?
- What month is Mother's Day celebrated in Australia?
- What are the four main points of direction on a compass?
- What are the traditional colours of the AFL jumper of Hawthorn Football Club?
- Rudolf Dassler founded which company in 1948, starting with the manufacturing shoes?
- Sofia is the capital city of which country?
- The hit songs *Time*, *Us And Them* and *Money* are from which 1970s Pink Floyd album?
- Signorina is the title of respect for an unmarried woman in which language?
- What is the capital city of the Northern Territory?
- The Eureka Rebellion by miners in Ballarat was a protest against the government of Victoria for what?
- Is electoral voting compulsory in the Netherlands?
- Who was the last Australian prime minister who was born in Victoria?
- In what decade was the New York marathon established?
- Who played the characters Bluebottle and Henry Crun in 1950s comedy series *The Goon Show*?
- Russell Brand portrays which character in 2012 film *Rock Of Ages*?
- What year was the first WNBA game played — between New York Liberty and Los Angeles Sparks?
- What was the birth name of Queen lead singer Freddie Mercury?
- Who appeared on the front of the original Australian \$50 banknote?
- Who was the opening act at the Woodstock Festival in 1969?
- What is the only country in the world beginning with 'O'?
- Which country did Venezuelan-born Garbine Muguruza represent when she was the No. 1-ranked female tennis player in September, 2017?
- Who wrote the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in 1890?
- Who founded the Muslim religion?
- In what US city was famed musician Louis Armstrong born?
- Which explorer discovered Cuba in 1492?
- How many of Australia's prime ministers were born in Queensland?
- What number Olympics was the 1956 Melbourne Games?
- Students from which four schools contested the Wizarding School Potions Championship in the *Harry Potter* franchise?
- Which Japanese horses finished first and second in the 2006 Melbourne Cup?
- Which US state was admitted as the 48th state on February 14, 1912?
- Which woman who won a Nobel prize in literature published five novels under the pseudonym John Sedges?
- What type of creatures are Jaq and Gus in 1950 animated Disney film *Cinderella*?
- In which country is the Glastonbury Festival staged annually?
- Which actor starred as Lady Joan Holland, beside Errol Flynn as Prince Edward, in 1955 film *The Dark Avenger*?
- In what decade did construction of the Taj Mahal start?
- What year did Queen Victoria die?
- Ketchikan, Juneau and Skagway are cities in which country?
- What royal navy vessel did the British government dispatch to search for and capture the mutineers of the HMS *Bounty*?
- Who did Andrew Demetriou replace to become AFL CEO in late 2003?
- Who stars as villain King Koopa in 1993 film *Super Mario Bros*?
- AJ Cook portrays which character in TV series *Criminal Minds* (2005-19)?
- Carisbrooke Castle is on which British island?
- How often are the UEFA European Championships held?
- The *Four Seasons* concertos were written by which composer in 1723?
- Which *The Wind in the Willows* character is obsessed with motor cars?



ANSWERS

1. Western Australia; 2. P; 3. Tracy; 4. Victoria; 5. Bird; 6. London at the Royal Mint; 7. May; 8. North, south, east & west; 9. Brown & gold; 10. Puma; 11. Bulgaria; 12. Dark side of the moon; 13. Italian; 14. Darwin; 15. Mining taxes; 16. No; 17. Malcolm Fraser; 18. 1970s (1970); 19. Peter Sellers; 20. Lenny; 21. 1997; 22. Farnborough; 23. Lord Howard Walter Foley; 24. Richie Havens; 25. Ormaiz; 26. Spain; 27. Oscar Wilde; 28. Muhammad; 29. New Orleans; 30. Christopher Columbus; 31. Three; 32. XVI; 16th Olympics; 33. Horwatts; Koldossovitz & Lejagoulo; 34. Delta Blues (first) & Pop Rock (second); 35. Arizona; 36. Pearl's Buck; 37. Mike; 38. England; 39. Joanne Dry; 40. 1830s; 41. 1901; 42. US (Alaska); 43. HMS Pandora; 44. Wynne Jackson; 45. Dennis Hopper; 46. Jennifer Jareau; 47. Isle of Wight; 48. Every four years; 49. Antonio Vivaldi; 50. Mr. Toad.



rescue crew perform is top cover, assisting a rescue helicopter to evacuate sick or injured people from commercial vessels and cruise ships.

"It's quite dangerous for a helicopter to do a winch or actually remove people from a vessel," Weeks says. "So we circle overhead of the helicopter and provide assistance."

"We effectively become their air traffic controller, arranging for the ship to be manoeuvred so the helicopter can land."

Given it's such an exciting career, Weeks is baffled as to why there aren't more women in the field.

"The number of female pilots worldwide is quite low and I don't know why this is," she says.

Weeks is often faced with surprise when she tells people what she does for a living. She attributes that to outdated notions of what it takes to become a pilot.

"People think it's expensive to learn to fly, and there's the perception that some of the jobs you get initially are poor-paying and tough, like flying in the middle of Australia," she says.

"But the whole face of aviation has changed. Now practically every university offers degrees in aviation, and there are so many different roles within it, there's something that will suit most people."

"There are different licence structures, and things like that, which can direct you into different jobs very early on."

At school, Weeks wasn't entirely confident her dream of becoming a pilot would eventuate into an actual career.

"I gave myself four years," she says. "I made a deal with myself that when I finished Year 12, I would apply to university. If I could make aviation work as a career, I'd keep doing it, and if I couldn't, I'd take up the uni spot."

Weeks says that while there are now many university courses for the field of aviation, the way she learned her craft was more like an apprenticeship, working and studying at the same time.

"I turned up to a flying school at Moorabbin Airport and just said, 'I want to become a pilot.'"

Cobham is currently seeking more pilots to join its special mission team, and Weeks urges women to apply.

Contrary to what we're used to seeing in Hollywood blockbusters, she says, the work environment is far from testosterone-fuelled or even particularly blokey.

"It's actually a wonderful field to be in because everything is so performance-based and as long as you meet your KPIs and standards it doesn't matter who you are or what your background is," she says.

Weeks says aviation has been her passion since childhood, and that any girl who dreams of taking to the sky should spread her wings.

"I remember being at the airport as a child, seeing all the jets and all the people coming and going, and thinking, 'This is fantastic'. I got such an energy from it," she says.

"Aviation is a passion. And if you have that passion, you should go for it."

Eye in the sky: Georgia Weeks loves the challenges and rewards of her career as a search-and-rescue-pilot; (above) at the controls in the cockpit; and (below left) one of the Challenger aircraft she flies.

PICTURES
NICOLE CLEARY

and-rescue pilot in Australia. Weeks says her career choice had nothing to do with being a feminist trailblazer, and everything to do with a desire to push herself.

AFTER her pilot training was complete, Weeks — born and raised in suburban Melbourne — spent seven years working for Cathay Pacific, flying Airbus A330 passenger aircraft. While she admits the travel was great, it wasn't long before the excitement began to wear off.

"I felt like I had nailed flying for an airline," she says. "I needed to challenge myself."

"Working with a commercial airline, you fly A to B. With search and rescue, you fly from A to B and do a whole lot in between."

Weeks describes working as a commercial pilot and working as a search-and-rescue pilot as a "completely different kettle of fish".

"The ultimate aim of any pilot is to keep the plane safe, so that's the same," she says. "But for me, the nice part of this job is the dynamic environment."

Working in search and rescue, the conditions are often hazardous, and the work requires absolute precision in stressful situations, necessitating the five-person crew. The most common job the search-and-