



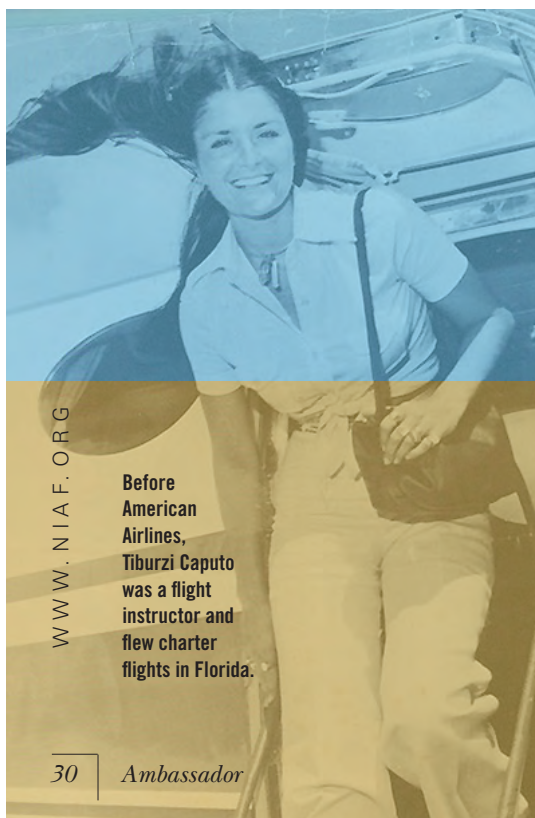
Flying High Well Grounded

**Bonnie
Tiburzi
Caputo**
First
Woman
Pilot
for a
Major
U.S. Airline

By Michelle Fabio

Recently honored by [American Airlines](#) with the creation of a Film Independent Award in her name, **Bonnie Tiburzi Caputo** was inspired by her father to become an airline pilot. After 26 years, with a family of her own, she hung up her wings and began mentoring younger generations of women aviators from the ground.

Above: American Airlines pilot Bonnie Tiburzi Caputo



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Before American Airlines, Tiburzi Caputo was a flight instructor and flew charter flights in Florida.

Bonnie Tiburzi Caputo

In 1973, when Tiburzi Caputo arrived at American Airlines' Flight Academy in Dallas, officials didn't have a uniform for her. At the time, no one had even thought about what a woman pilot might wear. So she designed her own.

Flight school was an important stop on Tiburzi Caputo's journey to becoming the first woman pilot for a major U.S. carrier, but her path began long before that. And, like many Italian Americans, it was paved by family and, of course, food.

Tiburzi Caputo remembers her father Gus as a real-life, swashbuckling Errol Flynn, complete with white silk scarf tied around his neck, always undertaking another adventure.

August Robert ("Gus") Tiburzi, whose parents settled in New Jersey from Abruzzo, started flying just 20 years after the Wright Brothers built their first practical airplane. He

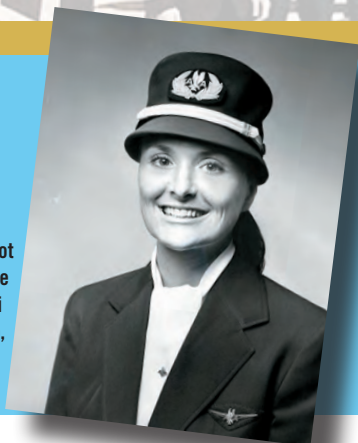
served with the U.S. Air Force's Air Transport Command during World War II, flying missions through the Amazon Jungle. He later flew with TWA and SAS as a commercial pilot.

Gus, who called his daughter a "natural flier" in a 1973 New York Times article, began teaching Bonnie at his flight school when she was 12 years old. By age 17, she had earned her private pilot's license. After serving as an au pair in Paris, Bonnie worked as a charter pilot and flight instructor in Florida, teaching mostly men, while applying unsuccessfully for an airline job.

Exposed to a high-flying lifestyle from an early age, Tiburzi Caputo's career choice wasn't surprising, except for one thing: In the early 1970s, it wasn't a given that a woman could become a pilot for a major U.S. airline. But, in 1973, at age 24, she did just that.

Bonnie Tiburzi Caputo (center) with her graduating class at American Airlines' Flight Academy, 1973.

AA pilot
Bonnie
Tiburzi
Caputo,
c. 1973



Bonnie Tiburzi Caputo



August Robert "Gus" Tiburzi,
Bonnie's father in what
she believes is his
Air Traffic Command uniform



After passing special tests to prove she was strong enough to pilot a jetliner, Tiburzi Caputo graduated from the academy with "excellent" qualifications, according to American Airlines (AA). She earned her pilot's wings and began as a flight engineer, the lowest rank, with a starting monthly salary of \$675.

"There certainly is something thrilling about taking the controls of an aircraft—a beauty of a beast," said Tiburzi Caputo, "and being able to maneuver it around tumultuous weather patterns or glide through a silky sky to your destination."

But the flying atmosphere in 1973 wasn't quite set up to include women. On her first day flying into Chicago O'Hare International Airport, Tiburzi Caputo learned women weren't allowed in the pilot's lounge. Her colleagues fixed that by writing "and Bonnie, too" under the "Male Crew Members Only" sign.

Although Tiburzi Caputo started out often assigned to the undesirable 6 a.m. route from JFK to Albany, she quickly moved up the ranks and was able to arrange her schedule to be home with her family as much as possible. In her 26 years with AA, she served as a captain on the Boeing

727, Boeing 757 and Boeing 767, and logged approximately 23,000 hours.

In the midst of her career as a pilot, Tiburzi Caputo was awarded the Amita Award honoring Italian-American Women of Achievement. The award was rather fitting, as her Italian heritage grounded her in many ways.

Indeed, the pull to her family on the ground led Tiburzi Caputo to take early retirement from AA at age 50. She experienced a monumental "shift in her priorities" as she chose to spend more time with her husband, Bruce, and children, Tony and Britt.

She became a "class mother" and enjoyed teaching Tony and Britt to ski, creating playhouses with Britt, building Tony a basketball hoop—"All things mothers love to do," as Tiburzi Caputo put it.

Her strong family ties were built upon childhood memories of Italian feasts her Swedish mother, Gunvor Inga-Britt Dahlberg, learned to prepare for all the aunts, uncles and cousins who would pop in. Tiburzi Caputo recalls the kind of chaotic, several-course meals that many who grew up Italian remember, ➤



Bonnie Tiburzi Caputo at the 2017 Film Independent Spirit Awards



Left: Bonnie Tiburzi Caputo with daughter Britt; father-in-law Tony Caputo; son Tony; and husband, Bruce Caputo, in 1996



Bonnie Tiburzi Caputo with Bonnie Award winning director Chloé Zhao



Bonnie Tiburzi Caputo



Bonnie Tiburzi Caputo and her husband, Bruce Caputo, on her last flight

complete with antipasto, pasta, a meat dish such as sausage with roasted peppers, and salad, followed by store-bought cannoli.

"Thinking back to those times," Tiburzi Caputo said, "it was certainly about the food, but most of all, it was about the family."

Tiburzi Caputo's Aunt Julie, her father's sister, was the family storyteller, often inviting her young niece over to learn traditional dishes—ravioli from scratch, lasagna and "the best marinara sauce and meatballs"—while she recounted Tiburzi lore.

"Aunt Julie let me help her cook, showing how to slowly mix and heat the olive oil into the tomato paste before the rest of the ingredients were added," Tiburzi Caputo said. "I heard about how Nona would dress my father and uncle in their sailor suits, scold them and, of course, feed them! I could listen to those stories all day."

The Amita Award is just one of many Tiburzi Caputo has collected over the years, including the Amelia Earhart Award by the Northeast Chapter of Airport Managers and the Women Making History Award by the National Museum of Women's History. In 1984, she won the Women of Accomplishment Awards

for the Wings Club in New York City and has been proudly active in the organization since.

Now she also has an award named for her. Last year, AA created The Bonnie Award, part of the Film Independent Spirit Awards, "to honor the innovative vision and breakthrough work of female directors." The award carries a \$50,000 prize.

Tiburzi Caputo first heard about it through a phone message left by AA's Global Marketing. She and her husband had just returned from a week in Rome.

"I replayed his message a number of times because I thought it was some sort of prank call," said Tiburzi Caputo. "I'm delighted American Airlines is still promoting women and, especially now, reaching out to women in endeavors other than aviation. And I'm thrilled that they decided to include me."

On January 6, 2018, Tiburzi Caputo was at the Boa Steakhouse in West Hollywood when Chinese American director Chloé Zhao was presented the first Bonnie Award for her Western drama "The Rider," which is nominated for best feature, director, editing and cinematography at the Spirit Awards to be held in March 2018.

Later this year, Tiburzi Caputo will be inducted into the Hall of Fame of Women in Aviation International (WAI), a nonprofit organization that supports and encourages women in aviation careers and interests. Tiburzi Caputo lauds WAI's "many programs and opportunities for women of all ages to work together" and is especially honored to be recognized by them.

Tiburzi Caputo has always been committed to mentoring the next generation of women interested in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) careers, especially since, although women continue to make strides in aviation, they still only make up between 6 and 7 percent of all pilots.

But, thanks to Tiburzi Caputo, at least women pilots for major U.S. carriers have something to wear now. In fact, her historic AA uniform is on display at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., signifying Tiburzi Caputo's well-earned and rightful place alongside other women pioneers in aviation. ▲

Michelle Fabio is a freelance writer based in Southern Italy and the author of "52 Things to See & Do in Calabria."