

BRIAN **FINKE**



BRIAN FINKE ESSAY BY ALIX BROWNE

THE PHOTOGRAPHER BRIAN FINKE spent two years flying around the world—without any real sense of destination—logging hundreds of thousands of miles to document the lives of on- and off-duty international flight attendants. That he was able to do so in a security delay-lost baggage-lack of service-post-9/11 world says as much about his ambitions as a documentarian as it does about his patience and charm as a human being.

A previous body of work, collected in significant part in the book *2-4-6-8* (Umbrage Editions), found Finke trailing exuberant squads of American cheerleaders and football players—a project for which he no doubt spent a lot of time on buses. In the flight attendants, the photographer has discovered another nomadic tribe, distinguished by its own language, mannerisms, and uniforms. But what struck Finke most were not the differences, but rather the similarities between these seemingly disparate groups—in their efforts to maintain the front of group camaraderie, in their performance of choreographed activities, in their codes of appearance.

As the personification of the glamor and promise of a world in which people soar through the air, a gin and tonic in hand, flight attendants have long occupied a privileged spot in the minds of air travelers and the airline industry itself. The first stewardesses (as they would be called well into the 70s) were in fact registered nurses. These industry pioneers were uniformed to exude a sense of both caring and competence and were cast as much for their skills as for their physiques. Stewardesses had to be tall enough to reach overhead lockers with ease, yet petite enough to navigate confined cabin quarters and narrow aisles. They also had to be single enough so as not to elicit calls from perturbed husbands wanting to know why dinner was not on the table.

In those early days of commercial air travel, a flight from San Francisco to Chicago in an uncomfortable 12-seat biplane minimally retrofitted for human transport could reportedly take 20 hours, and include as many as 12 stops for refueling of equipment, crew and cargo. And yet in its heyday, the job of stewardess (with a mandatory retirement at age of 35, it could scarcely be thought of as a “career”) was second only to that of Hollywood starlet in terms of allure, and being a stewardess was often a direct route to broader horizons—like a good marriage. As the industry grew, carriers began to recognize the value of their flight crews to help distinguish them from their competition. Uniforms came to reflect fashion trends: miniskirts, hot pants, and cat suits were commissioned by well-known fashion designers like the French couturier Pierre Balmain, Emilio Pucci, Bill Blass and Pierre Cardin.

Yet women who might have been attracted to the job because of this very image of glamor, freedom and independence, found that it ultimately served to undermine their authority and compromise their ability to perform their jobs. The old adage about Ginger Rogers—how she could do everything Fred Astaire did only backwards and in high heels—is implicit in the flight attendant’s plight.

Flight attendants eventually found themselves at the center of feminist debate.

Despite an era of both marked increases in security and decreases in service, flight attendants remain by and large a civilizing force; in that respect neither their social role nor their image has changed all that dramatically. Many of the airlines Finke frequented are from countries that continue to perpetuate the stereotype of the unflappably glamorous flight attendant and that stereotype’s accompanying nostalgia for the golden days of air travel. Flight attendants from Cathay Pacific, Air Asia, All Nippon, and Icelandair seem from another era when compared with those Finke encountered on, say, Jet Blue or Hawaiian Airlines. Singapore Air still actively promotes the charms of the Singapore Girl who is lauded for engendering Asian values and hospitality and whom their airline likes to think of as caring, elegant and serene. Yet throughout Finke’s flight attendant series, there are glimpses of what air travel has in fact become. Take, for example, the democratizing attempts of Southwest Airlines, where the class hierarchy has been abolished, and every day is casual Friday. Or the ill-conceived inflight entertainment concept, Hooters Air, where the uniform of orange short-shorts and a tight white T-shirt emblazoned with the company logo brings the idea of casting to meet certain size requirements to an entirely new level. In Finke’s photograph, the Hooters air hostess holds the microphone to the public address system as if she is not quite sure what to do with it. A photo of a young flight attendant for Tiger Airways (a no-frills carrier based in Singapore) practically hurling a plastic container containing a sad looking sandwich will come as an all too familiar sight to today’s frequent flier.

Finke’s approach in photographing these women and even the occasional man is neither nostalgic nor unduly unreal. He neither glamorizes his subjects nor does he portray them in the glaring, unforgiving light that many of us have come to understand as documentary. For the most part, it is the flight attendants themselves who appear to cling to the glamorous promise of their profession. If, on occasion, a particular image comes across as slightly surreal (and here the photo of an Icelandair flight attendant in training, perfectly composed and not a platinum blonde hair out of place as she blasts a fire extinguisher at an overhead bin comes to mind) it is perhaps because no matter how commonplace the experience air travel has become, flying is still something that should inspire a certain degree of awe. Finke emerges with his illusions mostly intact. Even as we stand by and watch as the flight attendants shop for toiletries or grab a meal in the company cafeteria, or return home to the lives many of us cannot even begin to imagine they have, they maintain, in his photos and in our minds, their quintessential flight attendant-ness. It is as if we, and they, only exist in that unnatural, vacuum-sealed experience, where even as you find yourself hurtling through the sky 36,000 feet above the earth at 600 miles an hour, time seems to stand perfectly still. ►►

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