

LAST DAYS OF THE STEWARDESS

WHAT'S BECOME OF THOSE CHARMING, CAPABLE, AND LEGENDARILY ALLURING FLYING COMPANIONS ONCE KNOWN AS STEWARDESSES? **AIMEE LEE BALL** LOOKS AT THE CHANGING DEFINITION OF IN-FLIGHT SERVICE.



AN ANONYMOUS FLIGHT attendant recently posted an open letter (read: bitch slap) "to the flying public" on the Internet: "We're sorry we have no pillows. We're sorry we're out of blankets. We're sorry the airplane is too cold. We're sorry the airplane is too hot. We're sorry the overhead bins are full.... We're sorry that's not the seat you wanted. We're sorry there's a restless toddler/overweight/offensive-smelling passenger seated next to you.... We're sorry that guy makes you uncomfortable because he 'looks like a terrorist....'" This sorry state of affairs ends with an admonition: "The glory days of pillows, blankets, magazines, and a hot meal for everyone are long gone. Our job is to get you from point A to point B safely and at the cheapest possible cost to you and the company."

We shall now observe a moment of silence for the golden age of travel, those madcap, *Mad Men* days when airplanes had piano bars and carved-at-your-seat chateaubriand, when the cabin crew was dressed by Emilio Pucci and the passengers dressed up too, when men were men and flight attendants were stewardesses. A recruiting ad from that time seems quaintly antediluvian: "To most passengers, »

A T+L TIME LINE: THE GLAMOROUS LIVES OF STEWARDESSES

1937 *Women's Home Companion* describes a stewardess as an amalgam of "nurse, ticket-puncher, baggage-master, guide (the Grand Canyon and Boulder Dam must be pointed out to all passengers), waitress, and little mother of all the world."



FROM LEFT: ALAN BAND/KEystone/GETTY; SUPERSTOCK

SO WHAT'S IT TO BE? ANDROIDS HANDING OUT PEANUTS, WITH A HOLOGRAM SHOWING HOW TO INFLATE A LIFE VEST? OR STEWARDESSES IN STILETTOS AND SPANX?

their stewardess is National Airlines. So we are looking for young ladies who have a flair for making people happy, young ladies with just the right blend of friendliness, competence and poise." Quite a departure from Steven Slater, the irate JetBlue attendant who famously announced "I'm done" and fled down his plane's emergency chute last year, or the Slater manqué I encountered on a flight I took shortly after having rotator cuff surgery: I asked him to help put my carry-on in the overhead compartment and was told, "That's not part of my job."

The changing dynamic of airline service seems to parallel the shifting role of airline personnel, whatever they're called. In the earliest days of commercial flight, there were teenage "cabin boys," and the first female stewardesses had to be registered nurses. (Such know-how would have been most welcome several years ago when, en route to Rome, I cleverly gave myself food poisoning from a homemade doggie bag. It's bad, very bad, when you hear "Is there a doctor on board?" over the loudspeaker and realize it's for you.) Dressed in hospital whites or military-style uniforms, a "sky girl" of the 1930's not only served meals and soothed nerves but also sometimes helped refuel the plane or bolt the seats to the floor, according to the 2009 book *Flying Across America: The Airline Passenger Experience* by Daniel L. Rust.

When World War II mobilized nurses, the airlines expanded their hiring parameters, but the requirements were draconian: Barbie-doll height and weight standards, girdles and heels worn at all times, and mandatory retirement by the decrepit age of...32.

Shedding their white gloves and raising their hemlines, stewardesses imparted a mixed message of flirtation and personal indenture. Advertising for National Airlines had Debbie/Cheryl/Karen cooing "Fly Me" (or, even less ambiguously, "I'm going to fly you like you've never been flown before"), and Continental claimed "We Really Move Our Tails for You." Braniff coyly asked "Does your wife know you're flying with us?" and Pacific Southwest Airlines stressed the advantage of an aisle seat, the better to see its miniskirted workforce. Male passengers were assumed to be overgrown frat boys: Eastern Airlines actually provided them with little black books to collect stewardesses' phone numbers.

From a feminist perspective, it was progress when flight attendants won the right to gain a few pounds, to let their hair go gray, to be pregnant, or to have a Y chromosome: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 insisted that men could do the job too, thus making a little full circle back to those early cabin boys. Fishnet stockings and hot pants were »

1967

The alleged memoirs of two "uninhibited" (but fictitious) stewardesses, *Coffee, Tea or Me?* launches three sequels, a TV movie, and the fantasies of thousands of men.



1940's Training takes place at facilities fittingly called "charm farms," which churn out clones with identical collar-length haircuts and teeth ground into even smiles.



1956 More than 300 "girls" compete to be Miss Skyway, marking the 25th anniversary of the stewardess. The surprised winner, Muffett Webb of Braniff (second from right), says that her job is good training to be a wife.



1965 The Braniff uniforms designed by Pucci include "space bubble" headgear (left) and the "airstrip," which calls for the stewardess to remove layers of clothing during a flight.



replaced by androgynous pantsuits. But as the dress code changed, so did the up-in-the-air experience. Air travel became democratic and accessible. The 800 million of us who pass through U.S. airports every year now comprise a remote and motley crew. We book our flights online, check in at kiosks, board in T-shirts and flip-flops, and withdraw under headsets and earbuds.

"We have no connection with passengers any more," a flight attendant for a major American airline confided to me, sotto voce. "Everybody has an iPod or an e-book. They don't want any conversation beyond, 'Would you like vinaigrette or creamy dressing?' And that's in business class, where we still serve meals. People don't think about the face of a flight attendant. They want a nonstop flight for the cheapest price." We trust that these faceless, nameless people asking us to turn off our cell phones or raise our seatbacks will know what to do in an emergency (10 percent of JetBlue's cabin crew has been recruited from police and fire departments) but their mandate is no longer the care and feeding of passengers, nor conveying the personality of the airline.

And yet... There's a slightly schizophrenic message from the industry these days, as if it's taking the temperature of public nostalgia for the era of "coffee, tea, or me," at the same time that technology is replacing the "me" factor. Continental is experimenting with subway-style "self-boarding" that bypasses an agent at the gate. The most overt sign that airlines no longer view flight attendants as personal service providers is Virgin America's touch screen for ordering food on board; the intimate exchange with the person

who brings your meal down the aisle approximates the bond with a delivery guy who brings kung pao chicken to your house. No tipping.

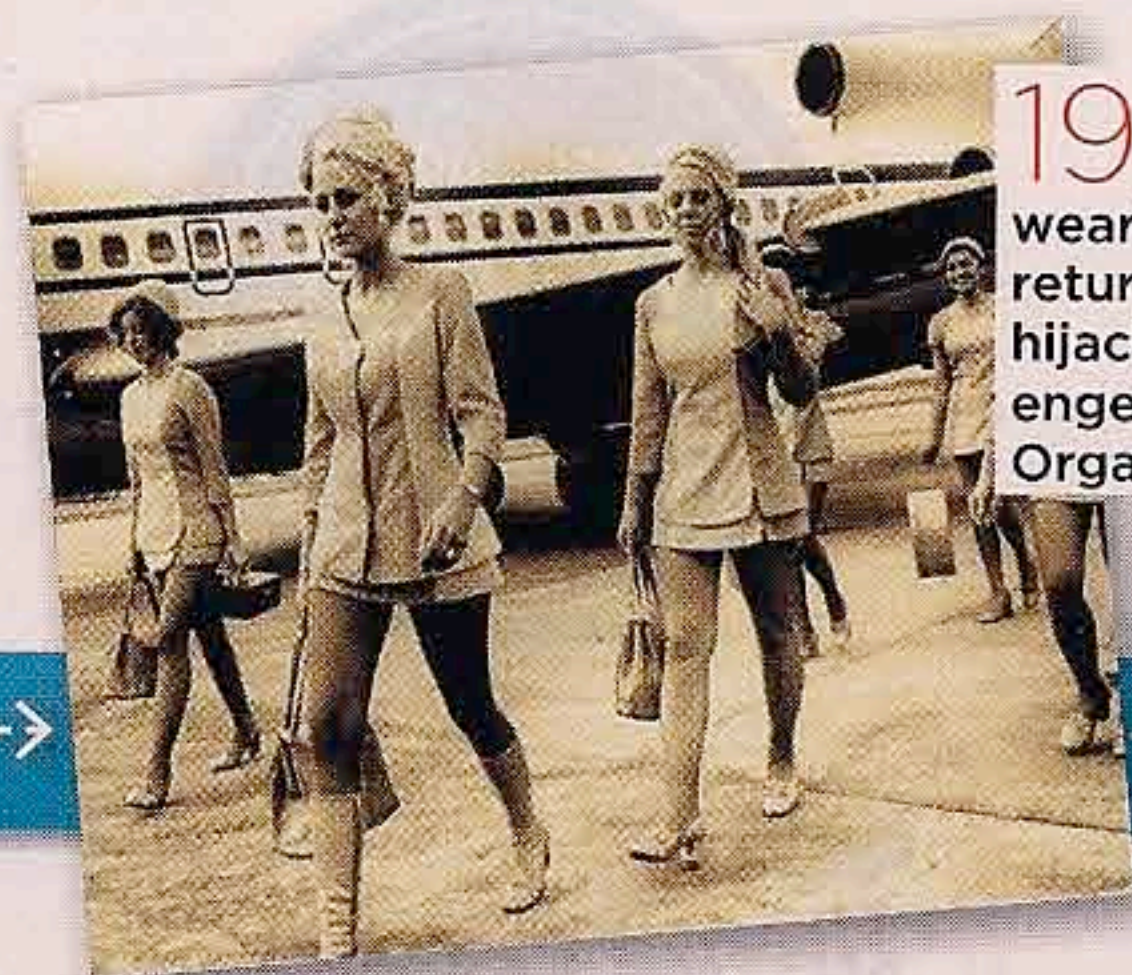
On the completely opposite hand, Virgin Atlantic has a new commercial featuring stunning young women in lipstick-red uniforms and spike heels pointing out the exit rows with vampy choreography and ripping open their bodices to serve ice cream. A commercial for the Russian airline Avianova shows a bevy of young women who strip down from skimpy uniforms into string bikinis to give the plane an orgiastic sponge bath. U.S. carriers seem more puritanical—or more respectful, depending on your point of view—but Southwest Airlines recently plastered an image of the cover girl for the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, full length, on the Boeing 737 it flies from New York City to Las Vegas.

So what's it to be? Androids handing out peanuts, with a hologram showing how to inflate a life vest? Or stewardesses in stilettos and Spanx? Perhaps a return to teenage boys, recruited out of the Scouts? "The way people now view air travel, it's public transportation," said Patricia A. Friend, former president of the Association of Flight Attendants, who started flying with United in 1966. "When my friends complain about no food on board or paying to check a bag, I tell them: Talk to me when you stop going searching for the cheapest ticket on the Internet. As long as we show up based on the price of the seat, we have settled for a particular level of service."

Until the industry decides on a paradigm for the 21st century, better pack a sandwich and fasten your seatbelt. It could be a bumpy ride. ✚

CURRENT

Chinese airlines take up the "charm school" approach to hiring. China Southern Airlines even creates a reality show competition to search for new flight attendants. Applicants race against one another lugging heavy suitcases and serving drinks to the judges.



1972 Stewardesses for Pacific Southwest Airlines, still wearing miniskirts and "pettipants," return to Miami after their plane was hijacked to Cuba. The uniforms engender a protest from the National Organization for Women.

1980's After years of lawsuits, flight attendants now have the right to gain a few pounds, let their hair go gray, get pregnant, be men, and wear polyester uniforms.



2006 Delta introduces uniforms designed by Richard Tyler—and, a few years later, a sexy safety video featuring a finger-wagging flight attendant (above), nicknamed Deltalina for her resemblance to the pillow-lipped actress.