

I Hired, Trained, and PFM

I looked at my ticket to the Pan American World Airways Honolulu Training Center at least once a day. I couldn't believe I got the job.

Friends and family were awestruck when I got my letter of acceptance. Wow, Pan Am! Everyone knew they only took the cream of the crop. And then there were travel benefits—free flights for the entire family. My mother could hardly contain herself.

It was the last semester of my senior year at the University of Arizona. I desperately wanted to travel after I graduated, but having no funds and not being one of the “born rich,” I had to get creative.

I devised a brilliant plan: I would apply to an international airline for a job as a flight attendant, fly for a couple of years, then go back and get my master's degree. The idea of being a “stewardess” didn't appeal to me. The idea of being an international flight attendant—ambassador to the world with travel benefits—certainly did.

I had the requisite two years of college, proficiency in a second language (well, two semesters of college Spanish), and I (barely) cleared the five-foot-two-inch minimum height requirement. I could only hope my weight was “in proportion to height,” whatever that meant. I would take no chances with my weight, however, and began my regimen of self-deprivation immediately after submitting my application. I counted the calories of every morsel of food that went into my mouth. At any given time of day, I could give you the tally of my caloric intake.

Living in Tucson was also a big advantage. I listened to

the Spanish radio station day and night. I watched Spanish television stations and tried to think only in Spanish. I really wanted this job. I would do anything.

All the prep work paid off. I passed my first interview with *flying colors*. My head hit the line on the wall for the five-foot- two-inch height minimum as I stood there, erect as possible, petrified. My shining moment in the preliminary Spanish test: reciting “*por favor, tiene que poner su equipaje abaho del asiento al frente de usted* (please put your hand luggage under the seat in front of you).”

The most horrifying aspect of the interview was the bone caliper test (gasp), during which I was informed that I had a small frame. The bone caliper test measures bone structure and thus determines where you fall on the “weight range” scale. Fortunately, my weight of 110 pounds was within the confines of the “weight in proportion to height” requirement for hiring. Years later I would get the pleasure of administering the famed caliper test to other anxious, would-be flight attendants when I was on assignment in the Recruiting Department. Can you say *schadenfreude*?

By the time I had my third and final interview at the Pan Am headquarters in San Francisco, I was an emaciated 104 pounds, and I could speak Spanish like a Señorita—or at least with enough proficiency to slide by.

Right after my final weigh-in, I went immediately to the Safeway and raced through the aisles with glee. I grabbed a crusty sourdough loaf and shoveled it in with one hand and picked up a bag of Fig Newtons with the other. As quickly as I could rip a bag open, I would devour it. No way could I make it to checkout first. I was in an eating frenzy, insatiable. Even an apple (80 calories) was a delicacy to me.

Now, the only thing standing between me and Pan Am training was getting the required immunization shots. I had a serious needle phobia,

but I suffered through it as a testament to how desperately I wanted the job. Small pox, diphtheria,

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typhoid, tetanus—and all on the same day. I thought I would die before I ever made it on the plane. The sheer terror of the shots notwithstanding, my arms were sore for days. If anyone so much as brushed by me, I practically went through the roof. It was quite an initiation to the elite club.

When I arrived at training I couldn't believe the caliber of women who were my fellow trainees. They were a seriously worldly lot and included foreign service "brats" and daughters of diplomats. Many of them had been raised in all parts of the globe, or at the very least had spent their junior year in college abroad. There was Andrea, a Swedish national, and Gabriele, a German national, and most of the other trainees had traveled extensively to foreign lands. The most exotic place I had ever been was camping in Mexico on spring break. My worldly adventures up to that point consisted of sitting around a Mexican campground drinking tequila with my friends from the University of Arizona—and pretty much nothing else. I felt like Gidget.

Our six-week training class at Pan Am's Honolulu Training Center might as well have been in Detroit, except for the palm trees. We were based at the airport, stayed at the airport hotel, and had a 10:00 p.m. curfew every night. Some of the trainees were wild, breaking the rules every chance they could. There was Sandy sleeping with Ted (they actually got married years later), drinking alcohol in the rooms (strictly prohibited), and surreptitious forays into Honolulu.

I, however, became known as the class "goodie-goodie," adhering to the letter of the law. There was no way I would take a chance of not getting through training. In training you could be sent home at the drop of a hat, no second chances, no excuses. Until you were off the six-month

probation period, everything was fair game. I didn't dare do anything to jeopardize graduation. Fun could wait.

The uniform fitting could have been a wedding dress fitting the way the seamstresses made such a fuss. When I was given

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my very own sky blue, Edith Head-designed uniform, it was like a dream. My eyes welled up with tears when I looked in the mirror wearing my Scottie hat, tunic, and belt with the iconic Pan Am “blue ball” buckle. Wearing that uniform made me feel part of something really big and important, as if I were part of a royal family. I had made it!

I experienced a “reality check” when we studied the training chapter entitled, “Service Procedures.” Learning the proper service procedures, i.e., the correct way to pass food trays, served as a harsh reality. I really wasn't too interested in which way to face the passenger and whom to serve first (depending on whether a man or lady was seated at the window). It sank in at that point that I would have to perform blue-collar tasks to get from Point A to Point B. I was bummed. The grandiose picture I had in my mind of international intrigue and glamour was blown to bits, but I tried not to think about it. Besides, the flights were only temporary until you got to that exotic destination. That service thing was such a minor detail.

Truth be told, that “service thing” was never my strong suit. I was lucky Pan Am hadn't done an extensive background check on that aspect of my qualifications. Although I listed “waitress–El Parador Restaurant, Tucson, Arizona,” on my resume, I was actually fired from that job when I dropped an entire tray of five meals on the floor, the plates crashing to the floor during the busy dinner hour. While the diners clapped, my

employer didn't find it so amusing, and I was "let go" as soon as the cleanup (and my humiliation) was completed to his satisfaction.

Our in-flight experience was a major highlight of the training. We practiced being real stewardesses on a real flight, although we worked in our own clothes. My flight went from Honolulu to Narita, Japan, which served as the airport for Tokyo. I couldn't fathom that I would get off the plane and be on the other side of the Pacific Ocean.

There were two of us on each training flight, and the crew

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members were eager to indoctrinate us into the "real" world. They informed us that everything we learned in our training classes would only slightly resemble reality when we got out there, "on the line," as they called it. They told us not to pay too close attention to anything we had been taught. When you were out there in the wild blue ball yonder, the crew ruled, and they had much better ways of doing things than these instructors, most of whom hadn't flown in years.

These tenured flight attendants were anxious to tell us how to bend the rules and work the system. They shared their secrets for bidding our monthly schedules and outsmarting crew scheduling when you were in the "pool," Pan Am's reserve system. Not only did we pose no threat to these seasoned veterans, but they also were thrilled to have us, since new blood meant that their own seniority would go up. And seniority was and is the name of the game in the airline business.

The most intense part of training was learning all the safety procedures for all of the aircraft in the Pan Am fleet. The class was taught by actual pilots who were on assignment at the training center. Our instructor, Ralph, was a stereotypical pilot, very authoritative and military-like, with a thick Southern drawl.

One day he was feeling benevolent and thought he would be doing us all a great service by teaching us the theory of aerodynamics. Ralph patiently went over the ins and outs of lift, to the bewilderment of my classmates. One by one we all raised our hands in sheer confusion.

“But can you explain again...” “But I don’t get ... ” “Why...?”

It just wasn’t sinking in.

Finally, in frustration, Ralph threw up his hands, “OK, OK,

forget it. Look, forget I said anything. Let’s start over. There are only three letters you need to remember: ‘P-F-M. P-F-M.’”

“Huh?” We looked at each other, still puzzled as ever.

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“Yea, PFM, Pure Fucking Magic. That’s it.”

We all laughed, but to this day I still believe Ralph. I really can’t fathom how a 747, an airplane half the length of a football field, can really get off the ground. Ralph’s simple solution is a comfort and still serves as the best way I know to explain how an airplane flies: Pure Fucking Magic.

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