

FRANK W. ABAGNALE: PAN AM'S GREAT IMPOSTOR

by Jeff Kriendler



Frank Abagnale.

Frank W. Abagnale has used America's airlines to boost his financial foundation for nearly 50 years. In the 1960s, he swindled Pan Am and other major carriers such as TWA, Eastern, Delta, and United by posing as a bogus Pan Am first officer, resplendent in white hat and black double-breasted blazer. While not jump-seat riding, he wrote bad checks from Pan Am-paid hotel rooms, not yet of age to legally buy an alcoholic drink or vote.

If the story sounds familiar, it should, as a film of his early life entitled *Catch Me if You Can* has recorded \$350 million in worldwide sales and is frequently aired on television. Today, he is a million-mile flier who travels all over the world lecturing on bank fraud and forgery—still on the FBI's most sought after list—but now sought for his knowledge of how the bad guys abuse the system. His story is a life of juvenile crime and adult redemption.

About the film, Abagnale notes, "Although I was not consulted in the scripting or production of the film, Director Steven Spielberg, who has become a close friend, did a masterful job in putting my early life of crime to film. His selection of Leonardo DiCaprio to play the young Frank Abagnale was brilliant and I was not only greatly flattered by his portrayal, I was most impressed with his work ethic in researching the story and getting inside my persona."

When he was 16, Abagnale ran away from his home in suburban New York and came to the Big Apple with a checkbook and \$200 in his bank account. "I first lived with the family of a young boy I met while taking the train to the city and soon found a job at a stationary firm, using some experience I'd had while working at my father's printing business." Even as a teenager, Frank harbored a mischievous side and had the idea of writing bad checks to support himself. Soon he had written hundreds of rubber checks. "I altered my birth date of my driver's license by adding ten years but because of my height and premature graying hair, I was mature for my age and was able to use my fake ID," he explains.

With a goal of enhancing his bank check writing scheme, he came up with a plan to alter his identity. "It could be said that my career in crime started when I was passing the Commodore Hotel in the summer of 1964. The hotel was just a few blocks from the Pan Am Building and when I saw an Eastern crew coming out of the hotel I was greatly impressed with their professional look and their unabashed joy." He adds, "By the time I passed in front of the Pan Am Building, I had the scheme—get a real Pan Am uniform, wings, and an ID—whatever was needed—to impersonate a pilot and elevate my stature with unsuspecting bank clerks and managers."

Without detailing all his devious ways (you have probably seen the movie, anyway), Abagnale was successful in every part of the plot, even forging a FAA license to gain cockpit access to deadhead on domestic carriers. "My uniform was my alter ego, whenever I felt lonely, depressed, rejected, or doubtful of my own worth, I'd dress up in my pilot uniform and seek out a crowd," he wrote in his autobiography.

Abagnale was very intelligent and studied a lot about the airline business to perfect his sham, frequently by dating unwitting air hostesses to learn the tricks of the celestial trade. Although he says he never intended to become a con-artist, "It started out as a means of survival, it

turned into an adventure, then it became a chase.” He also followed a twisted code of ethics because in his way of thinking, he never financially injured an individual or caused someone to lose their job—he targeted only large organizations.

Ironically, it is those institutions from which he makes his living today, consulting to many Fortune 500 companies, and boosting his elite status with America’s legacy airlines.

In his early years while focusing on the airlines, he never tried to fly on Pan Am because he thought he would be easily exposed. However, he rode hundreds of flights of other US carriers all over the country and overseas, leaving a trail of bad paper totaling some \$2.5 million in a five-year spree that covered 26 countries.

The FBI finally caught up with him when he was only 21 years old in a small French village in 1970 after pulling off his scam as a Pan Am pilot, an Atlanta doctor, a professor at Brigham Young University, and an assistant attorney general for the State of Louisiana.

Fortune magazine wrote, “If there were a forgery hall of fame, Frank Abagnale would have his own wing.”

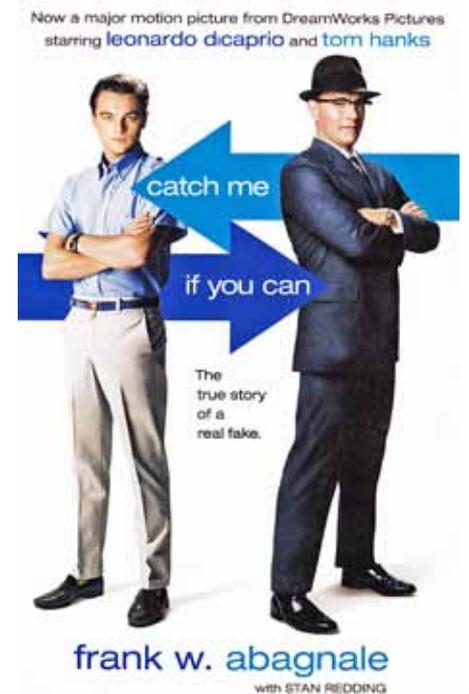
In addition to inspirational speaking engagements where he receives a considerable fee per appearance, Abagnale travels the world helping the FBI and financial institutions prevent fraud. When he was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment, the FBI came to him after four years and offered him a deal that he could not refuse—work for for the Feds for life for free (it has been 40 years and counting) and help the bureau out-con the cons. In an article in *Charleston Magazine* about Frank’s life, Keith Slotter, special agent in charge of the San Diego Field Office and former deputy director in charge of the FBI Academy, said, “Frank has this incredible intelligence and brings a fresh, comprehensive perspective from both sides of the law. He understands criminal motivation and knows how they operate.”

Abagnale can point out flaws in ATMs and has developed document security products and fraud prevention programs for more than 15,000 financial institutions. He helped develop the Sanford Uni-Ball 207, the only ‘safe’ pen in the world which cannot be altered by chemicals or solvents. More than 20 million of these are sold annually in the United States. In the 1990s, Abagnale helped develop PrivacyGuard, the world’s largest and oldest credit monitoring service currently used by ten of the 12 largest banks in America to protect their customers from identity theft.

Flight attendant readers will be pleased to know that Frank has only the highest opinion for the genus. “I wouldn’t want anyone to get the impression that flight attendants, as a group, are promiscuous. They aren’t. The myth that all flight attendants are passionate nymphs is just that, a myth”. He adds, “The ones I know are all intelligent, sophisticated, and responsible young women. Stews are good people and I have very pleasant memories of the ones that I met.” The feeling is mutual; he sits on the board of Pan Am’s organization of flight attendants, World Wings International, and actively participates in its charitable activities.

Although he was certainly attracted to the young ladies he flew with, often he had an ulterior motive: he wanted to learn more about the industry for polishing his craft and would ask them a long list of questions.

When asked if he ever is nostalgic about the long-gone days of luxury air travel, he answers, “Yes. There are no more Pan Ams and TWAs. Luxury and convenience are gone. The airlines are now simply a mode of transport—traveling today is nothing more than hard work. One great



A still from the movie: Leonardo DiCaprio poses with a bevy of Pan Am hostesses.

thing about the movie is that it reminds us of what we lost in the bygone years of glamour in the air.”

Abagnale’s story is not about how he flimflammed the airlines, banks, hospitals, and the rest. It is a story about redemption: how he turned his life around. “That period was only five years of my life when I was a lost teenager without direction. The media never focuses on at what I have done since. I turned my life around and that’s why Steven Spielberg loved my story—he really appreciated the redemption angle.”

He has to live with the fact that there are those who still see him as a fake and hardened criminal. “I live with that burden every day, that there are people who don’t trust me.” He has turned down pardons from three presidents. Although there was no restitution clause in his sentence, he paid back every dollar he made during his charades—“I wanted my kids to know I paid it all back.”

The Great Impostor of yore is now a charitable man, speaking to graduations at the FBI Academy, high schools, and colleges. He is also especially devoted to children’s causes. At a Homeland Security conference, he announced, “When I look back forty years ago, I’m not fascinated by what I did. To me, the important part is that I came out and turned it into this, something positive and productive. That says so much about our country, that it gives you a second chance.”

The most important event in Abagnale’s re-birth as a model citizen was marrying Kelly. They have three grown sons—one of whom is an FBI agent—another in China and one in Charleston, South Carolina, where Frank and Kelly now reside. Clearly his greatest accomplishment in life is being a loving husband and father, and he does not miss an opportunity to express how much he cherishes his family. “I was lucky enough to find someone who believed in me and having a family changed me. Remember what being an adult is: It has nothing to do with money or awards. A real man loves and is faithful to his wife. You will do nothing greater in your life than be a great spouse and parent.” 🌐



*Boeing 707-321B Clipper Flora Temple
at Paris-Orly.*

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