

MINNESOTA'S PHOENIX

From the Ashes of Braniff to Sun Country Airlines

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Foreword by Thomas Petzinger Jr., author of *Hard Landing*

BOOK CLUB STUDY GUIDE

This guide is designed for readers who want to dig deeper into the improbable story of those who built Minnesota's hometown airline from nothing. The questions below invite conversation about resilience, risk, community, and what it means to build something that matters.

PART ONE · THE FALLEN AIRLINE

Braniff International and the Age of Deregulation

On May 12, 1982, Braniff International became the first major U.S. airline to fail since deregulation. In a single morning, 8,775 employees found themselves suddenly out of work. In Minneapolis, over a thousand of them—pilots, flight attendants, mechanics—were suddenly grounded.

1. The Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 unleashed competition that carriers like Braniff were unprepared for. In your own life or career, have you ever seen an institution—a company, a community organization, a neighborhood business—fail because it couldn't adapt fast enough to a changing world? What did that feel like from the inside?
2. Braniff's chairman Harding Lawrence gambled everything on rapid expansion, convinced that only the biggest carriers would survive deregulation. Was his instinct wrong, or simply poorly timed? How do we distinguish bold vision from reckless overreach?
3. Jim Olsen believed that American Airlines essentially engineered Braniff's collapse through a deliberate price war. If true, what does that say about the ethics of competition? Where is the line between aggressive business strategy and predatory destruction?
4. The book describes the Braniff bankruptcy as "both sudden and inevitable." Think of a crisis in your own experience that felt sudden but, in hindsight, had been building for years. What signals were ignored, and why?

PART TWO · THE HAPPY HOUR THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Founding an Airline at a VFW Hall

A few days after Braniff's collapse, a group of the displaced Minneapolis-based employees gathered at a VFW hall in Bloomington. What began as collective grief turned into something else entirely. Thirteen of the former Braniff pilots and flight attendants decided to start their own airline. The founders used personal savings and borrowed money to buy into the new company.

5. The founding meeting at the VFW has an almost mythological quality: a group of people who had just lost everything deciding to build something new. Have you ever been part of a moment when loss became the seed of something unexpected? What made that possible?
6. Flight attendants stitched their own uniforms on home sewing machines and worked seventeen-hour days while being paid for twelve. The book describes a culture where no one was above the menial work and everyone felt like an owner. Have you ever experienced a workplace or community with that sense of shared ownership? What made it work, or what made it fail?
7. The founders included only two flight attendants—Joan Smith and Judy Peterson—as equity owners, despite the fact that flight attendants were critical to the airline’s launch and culture. What does this reveal about how founding stories get written, and who gets left out?
8. Sun Country is reportedly the only airline in history to acquire its first aircraft based on the outcome of a professional football game. What does a detail like that tell you about the culture of the founders? Do quirky origin stories shape the long-term character of organizations?

PART THREE · PEOPLE WHO BUILT IT

The Founders and the Human Story

Minnesota’s Phoenix is, at its core, an oral history. The founders speak in their own voices and the book gives space to the full texture of their lives: dry humor, quiet leadership, stubbornness, loyalty, and occasional heartbreak. Most have passed away. Cal Peterson is the last surviving founder at the time of publication.

9. Jim Olsen is described as someone who led not loudly or with ego, but by doing. Think of the most effective leader you have personally known. Did they lead loudly or quietly? What did their leadership actually look like in practice and have you adopted any of their behaviors?
10. Cal Peterson never earned his captain wings at Braniff because “Braniff started going backwards in 1978.” His career was derailed by forces entirely outside his control. How do we make sense of ambition interrupted by circumstance? How did the founding of Sun Country give him a different kind of captaincy?
11. The book draws heavily on oral history interviews. How are stories different when told in someone’s own words versus when the same events are told by a journalist or historian? Does this make you think any differently about the legacy you would like to leave for your family, friends, colleagues?
12. Several founders are described in their obituaries as well as through interview transcripts. How does knowing that most of these people have passed away change how you read their stories?

PART FOUR · AVIATION AS A WAY OF LIFE

For the Aviation Enthusiast

Although many aspects of the book reach a broad range of readers, *Minnesota’s Phoenix* is written with enough aviation-specific details to engage industry enthusiasts. The book traces the arc from the Boeing

727's golden age through deregulation's chaos to Sun Country's eventual fleet of 737-800s, and includes the technical, regulatory, and economic realities that shaped every decision the founders made.

13. The Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 is often described as a consumer triumph: lower fares, more routes, more competition. But the book shows the human wreckage that accompanied it. Forty-plus years later, do you think deregulation was good for aviation? Are you surprised at the brutally competitive nature of the airline industry?

14. Sun Country began as a charter carrier, not a scheduled airline. The book traces the strategic tension between charter and scheduled service throughout the airline's history. Why does that distinction matter economically and culturally, and what does it mean for passengers?

15. The founders had to become regulatory experts, business development executives, and baggage handlers simultaneously. What does that tell you about what it takes to start an airline, versus what it takes to start a business in another industry?

16. Sun Country's eventual success under Apollo Global Management came through cargo contracts with Amazon and a disciplined Ultra Low Cost Carrier model. Is the Sun Country of 2024 the same airline the founders built? What survives of the original spirit and what has been lost?

PART FIVE · MINNESOTA'S HOMETOWN AIRLINE

Place, Identity, and What We Call Home

Sun Country is inextricably Minnesotan: born at MSP, built by people who chose to stay rather than scatter, sustained by Midwestern travelers who showed patience even when weather or mechanical delays intervened. The book is as much about Minnesota's character as it is about aviation.

17. What does it mean for a city or region to have a "hometown airline"? Is Sun Country's identity as Minnesota's airline a marketing story, a genuine cultural fact, or both?

18. The founders were described as "Ice Heads" by their Braniff colleagues in Texas—a term of mild condescension that the Minnesotans wore as a badge of pride. How does regional identity shape the culture of organizations born in specific places?

19. The book's postscript describes the Allegiant acquisition as "landing like a body blow" for those who built the airline. As Sun Country prepares to disappear as an independent brand, what is lost, what is gained, and for whom? Can a story preserve something that a corporation cannot?

20. If you are a Minnesotan: What does Sun Country mean to you personally? If you are not: Is there a local institution—an airline, a team, a business, a neighborhood—whose loss would feel similar to you?

PART SIX · BIGGER QUESTIONS

Themes for Deeper Conversation

21. The book's epigraph comes from Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* describing the phoenix who burns and is reborn. In what ways does that image fit Sun Country's story—and in what ways does it fall short? Is rebirth always redemptive?
22. Thomas Petzinger writes in the foreword that the most successful founders “exhibit openness to change and faith in others.” Does Sun Country's founding story bear that out? Where did that faith get tested and where did it hold?
23. The book draws a distinction between corporate history and human history. Airlines can be acquired; names can be painted over, but the stories in these pages, Fernandes argues, cannot be erased. Do you agree? What is the relationship between institutional legacy and personal memory?
24. If you could ask one of the founders a question that the book doesn't answer, what would it be?

FURTHER READING

Hard Landing by Thomas Petzinger Jr.—The authoritative account of airline deregulation and its human consequences. The foreword writer's own book, and an essential companion to *Minnesota's Phoenix*.

Bureau of Transportation Statistics (bts.gov)—Freely available historical data on U.S. airline performance, routes, and employment.

Airlines Confidential podcast (airlinesconfidential.com)—Created by former Spirit Airlines CEO Ben Baldanza and hosted by Scott McCartney, this podcast digs deep into everything that touches the aviation industry.

GET INVOLVED

Share your Sun Country Story! We're collecting stories for a potential second edition of the book. Send us an email at MinnesotasPhoenix@gmail.com to keep the story alive.

Minnesota's Phoenix is available at Amazon and wherever books are sold.

For bulk orders, educator discounts, scheduling the authors to speak to your group, or just for kicks, email us at MinnesotasPhoenix@gmail.com or visit karynfernandes.com.

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