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Local Flying Tiger Lines flight attendant recalls years of service to troops during Vietnam War

By Vera Kochan



Flying Tiger Line flight attendant Leslie Ann Pfeifer aboard a MAC charter flight in 1968 Photo courtesy of Leslie Pfeifer

It was a war that eventually drew criticism and disdain in the United States. Nevertheless, the men and women who served in Vietnam had the courage to answer when called upon to enter into one of the most unforgiving and terrifying experiences of their lifetime.

Moraga resident Leslie Pfeifer (Laird) served for three years as a flight attendant during the Vietnam War on Flying Tiger Airlines, a cargo and passenger delivery company.

Flying Tiger history began during World War II when the original aircrafts were small fighter planes. Piloted by the novice American Volunteer Group, who were from all branches of the military and civilians, these men provided military support to the Republic of China in their defense against the Japanese invasion between 1941-1942. The planes had an angry shark face painted on the nose, but earned the nickname of Flying Tiger when admiring Chinese citizens marveled at their "dive

and zoom" maneuvers exclaiming, "Fei Hu!" Flying Tiger!

When the war ended, a few of the AVG pilots purchased several war surplus cargo planes and used them to carry supplies to U.S. troops during other incursions under the name Flying Tiger. In 1965, the company began troop transport flights to Vietnam with newly purchased Boeing 707 and Douglas DC-8 aircraft.

Answering an ad in the San Francisco Chronicle, "I was hired in 1967, and made over 75 trips to Vietnam," recalls Pfeifer. The airline was based in San Francisco and flights were manned by an all-Bay Area crew. "A flight attendant seniority list of 200 was hired that year and trained in a matter of months. We were civilian employees of Flying Tiger Line. The U.S. Air Force gave flight crews the rank of 2nd Lt. which gave us protection under the Geneva Conferences, if captured." Flight attendants were paid \$425 per month. "It wasn't combat pay, but I made more money than my [future] husband who was a Navy dentist." Although they didn't meet on one of her flights, her husband, Dave, served in Vietnam on the USS Ranger and Kitty Hawk.

A sign of the times, flight attendants had to conform to sexist rules. They had to be single. Besides having to wear girdles and high heels, the women also had to undergo a humiliating weight check at certain times of the month. If they were overweight, they were taken off the payroll until the weight was lost.

The transport planes carried troops from all branches of the military: 200 passengers, 5 flight attendants and 4 cockpit crew. Passengers sat three seats on either side of a long aisle. Flights departed various Air Force bases along the West coast and flew the polar route to different bases throughout Vietnam. The process was reversed on return flights, bringing back soldiers who were wounded or had completed their 13 months "in country."

What began as an exciting new job to see the world soon lost its luster for the 21-year-old Pfeifer. During her first flight to Vietnam, she had long conversations with a soldier who upon departing the plane gave her his rosary beads. She didn't want to take the symbolic gift, but he insisted. After a few exchanged letters, she never heard from him again.

The flight crew were required to take all weapons and have them secured in cargo, however on one flight a hand grenade was found rolling down the aisle of an airborne plane.

Flights were never scheduled, but were expected to land in daylight for safety reasons. In the event of an attack on land, flight attendants were instructed to run for cover in a zig-zag pattern in order to avoid being hit by gunfire. "We all joked about this and decided we would go down with the plane rather than get shot by a Marine startled by five women jumping on top of him," remembered Pfeifer. "There were bullet holes in the belly of the aircraft. Were we scared? No. We had no fear - we were doing our jobs. There was no fear. We were busy with paperwork, getting passengers on and off and galley servicing."

The crew never stayed in Vietnam overnight. Planes were refueled and serviced in two hours to prepare for the turn-around flight back to the U.S. Oftentimes, they would head over to "DOOM" - DaNang Officer's Open Mess - for refreshments or go for drives along the local beach.

"We really weren't prepared for the reality of taking young men to war," stated Pfeifer. "The soldiers weren't really prepared either. We tried to make the troops comfortable. The flights were long - they spent 18-20 hours on our planes to and from Vietnam. They would do a lot of sleeping, but we did a lot of laughing and talking. The food wasn't great - all government issue - but it was edible, and no one complained except the flight attendants. The troops were great passengers. They helped us collect garbage, collect trays and smash milk cartons. The GIs and officers would give us their patches and medals - we collected many and wore them. Our in-flight dresses would be covered with medals."

The disposition of the troops on the flights would vary according to which direction they were headed. "The mood going over was one of somber fear. Coming home was a mood of jubilation. They were so grateful for cold milk!" said Pfeifer. "And were happy to see American girls and returning to the 'World' as they called home. "

Taking on soldiers in Vietnam was unlike anything else - especially in DaNang where the Marines came on board straight out of the jungle, hot, dirty, exhausted, almost dazed, Pfeifer said. "We welcomed 365 sweaty soldiers onto our semi-air conditioned aircraft. Some had a look of desperation. As we took off and got airborne they would loosen up, but [there was] no sense of joy until we were well out of Asian airspace. Landing in the U.S. - loud, joyful clapping - but they came home to an ungrateful nation."

Pfeifer was upset over the way troops came home to protests and disrespect. "My emotions and demeanor changed completely. As time went on I became more and more angry and saddened over the treatment of the soldiers. They were doing what they were told and serving our country. I lived in Berkeley during those years and witnessed protest marches and anti-war demonstrations. I could not participate. The men and women on our flights had served our country, some wounded - physically and mentally. There was no regard for the young men who risked their lives and thousands losing their lives."

Still staying in touch with many of her colleagues - Andee Wright (Palm Springs), Ann Montgomery (Palm Springs), Josie Gibson (Walnut Creek) and Georgeanne Seavey (San Ramon) - Pfeifer said, "My fellow flight attendants were a strong bunch of women with adventurous spirits. Our jobs were emotional, long hours, we worked hard, partied hard and the friendships made have been lasting. We bonded, were doing something that has a lasting effect on our lives. Strong friendships remain these 50 years later."

To watch Pfeifer's video presentation to the American Association of University Women visit: <https://oml-ca.aauw.net>

Reach the reporter at: vera@lamorindaweekly.com

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