

A BRIEF BREAK

by

Marlys Harper

Every seat was filled on the flight departing from Bangkok, Thailand destined for Saigon, Viet Nam. It was a Pan Am 727 taking the uniformed, all-male passengers back to Viet Nam after they enjoyed five days of R & R in Bangkok. It was 1971. We were five stewardesses, a purser, and three cockpit crew. Our job was to make this flight as pleasant as possible for our passengers, which sounds like our mission for every flight, but everyone aboard knew this was different.

On this flight, our individual views about the Viet Nam War meant absolutely nothing. Each crew member had bid this line (schedule for the month) as one of three choices that were awarded by seniority. We had chosen to make the trip to Saigon, transporting approximately 106 humans back to the jungle they knew too well, back to being ever-alert, extremely uncomfortable, and always vulnerable. Many of the passengers were younger than I was; many had not volunteered to serve. All were gentlemen.

Their faces revealed little, just quiet resignation. I could only imagine the emotions they had recently locked away. Some had met wives and girlfriends in Bangkok for a brief respite from their constant longings and fears while serving in Viet Nam. They had relaxed, danced and drunk, and celebrated their love. Too soon came the inevitable, dreaded wrenching apart, and goodbyes.

Pan Am had been contracted since 1966 for these R & R flights. A Pan Am captain originated the idea, which found its way to the appropriate government decision-maker, who accepted the offer immediately. It was implemented within days. Pan Am charged the government \$1 per month for the first four months of service. After that, a more remunerative contract was initiated, with the condition that the airline would not profit from these flights. In the first year, 100,000 servicemen were transported to eight resort destinations. Pan Am flew 18 R & R flights daily into Viet Nam during the second year.

The men were welcomed on the PA by the captain. The flight was to be less than two hours, during which he hoped they would enjoy a drink and the meal. As standard on other flights, the purser reviewed emergency procedures and asked that no one smoke until the captain extinguished the “no smoking” sign. Then, we would start the beverage service.

When the “no smoking” lights were turned off, almost every man lit a cigarette. Seeing the clouds of smoke filling the cabin, the purser politely reminded the men on the PA that they had air vents above their heads. In unison, 106 arms responded by reaching up to open the vents. We should not have been surprised because they were a disciplined group. But, it was humorous to us. Not as easily explained was their similar taste when we took the

drink orders. Bourbon and coke was the drink favored by the majority, although Pan Am had stocked a full bar of liquor.

Near the end of the beverage service, the captain came on again with updated flight status, the altitude, the approximate local time of arrival, and that we would soon be serving the meal. After the meal, there would be a topless coffee service, he stated. Like me, the passengers may have thought they heard the announcement incorrectly. I asked Ana, a stewardess, what he meant. Not wanting to be a spoiler even for me, she only smiled and said, "You'll see."

Ana and Osa were twin Norwegian stewardesses with whom I had flown at least once previously. Unforgettable, they were both beautiful, curvy, identical blondes, but their attraction transcended the visible. Both demonstrated a quick wit, contagious laugh, constant helpfulness, and compassion. Every Purser would love to have them on her crew.

We served a hot meal consisting of steak, home fries, green beans, milk, and ice cream. Being a well-trained and efficient crew, we soon had the trays and trash collected and stowed. Only the coffee service remained.

Ana or Osa - I couldn't tell them apart - started a slow, pseudo-seductive slink up the aisle from the back galley while taking off her apron. She would flick it gently on a man's neck, move another step, and flirtatiously brush another man's cheek. The men responded with clapping, whistling, and laughter. All eyes on her, she continued to the cockpit, gifting numerous light touches as she went. As she entered the cockpit, Osa started from the back, pleasantly surprising the spectators again. The applause increased as she began leisurely unbuttoning her white uniform blouse while bestowing playful strokes as she made an unhurried stroll up the aisle. She entered the cockpit as Ana was exiting, laboriously unbuttoning her blouse with one hand while bestowing gentle caresses with the other. Finally taking it off completely, she wore only a camisole underneath. She swirled and dragged the blouse lightly over the men. Their total attention was on her and the anticipation was palpable, as the clapping and whistling reached a crescendo. They were so distracted that they did not notice the camisole was sewn to her skirt.

It was difficult to be sure where each of the identical beauties might be at any time. Then, the cockpit door opened slowly. A tall figure emerged carrying a pot of coffee. It was the flight engineer, and yes he was shirtless!

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