A MESSAGE FROM RICHARD R. KELLEY TO OUR OUTRIGGER ‘OHANA

Was this “SKYGOD” my pilot?
By Dr. Richard Kelley

In 1942, at age 8, I was part of a group of women and children in Honolulu who were herded onto an enormous Pan American World Airways seaplane – a “Flying Clipper” – heading for San Francisco and safety from widely feared new bombing attacks or even an invasion of Hawaii by the forces of Imperial Japan. About the same time, a young man named Gerry Mahan was just beginning his career with Pan Am, piloting Boeing 314 “flying boats” out of San Francisco.

More importantly, the story also brought back memories of some very difficult times and how much Pan Am did to develop Travel & Tourism in the Pacific and Indian ocean areas where Outrigger Resorts is now doing business.

In 1928, Juan Trippe, the head of a small airline operating in the Caribbean, brought together some of his regional competitors to form Pan American World Airways. Their goal was to develop a network that could take passengers around the globe. Since there were very few airports at the time, they marked off sections of normally smooth waters in harbors as seaplane “runways.”

Pan Am’s “Flying Clippers” followed a series of island groups so they were never too far from a sheltered place to land, refuel and be serviced. In San Francisco, the landing/takeoff area was near Treasure Island and the Bay Bridge. In Honolulu, they used the calm waters of Pearl Harbor. Then it was on to Midway, Wake, Guam and the Philippines. There, Bob MacGregor, who would later become a Hawaii travel executive, co-developer of the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel and a mentor to me as I learned the travel business, used to take a small boat out onto Manila Bay to light kerosene torches in the floating pots that marked the watery runway for the Pan Am planes departing at night for destinations like Hong Kong and Singapore.
Pan Am and United Airlines were the major carriers that helped get the post-World War II leisure and business travel going. It was prestigious, fascinating and exciting to work for Pan Am at that time.

During those so-called “boat days” (in reference to the flying boats), the pilots were the “high priests.” Their word was law. They wore distinctive uniforms whose double-breasted black jackets had four gold stripes on the sleeves. The visors of their white caps sparkled with more gold. After landing, these “SKYGODS,” as they were also known, were shuttled to the finest hotels in black limousines.

In the 1950s, Pan Am grew and as airports were developed, it switched to double-decked Boeing Stratocruisers. I flew to San Francisco in those impressive aircraft during my college years, 1951 to 1955. Pan Am flew approximately 2.7 million revenue passenger miles in 1955.

The jet age followed in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s. The wide-body Boeing 747 replaced the old Boeing 707s that had pioneered jet travel.

Like most things in this world, Pan American World Airways did not last forever. Business was booming but operations had become very complicated and risky. Terrorists had hijacked or bombed several of its aircraft. The strain began to show.

- By 1985, although its revenue passenger miles had ballooned to over 27 million annually, the airline was in such dire financial straits that it had to sell its Pacific routes to United Airlines for $750 million.
- On Dec. 21, 1988, over Lockerbie, Scotland, terrorists blew up Pan Am Flight 103 en route from London to New York, killing all the holiday travelers aboard.

It was a sad ending for a great company with so many wonderful people, like Captain Gerry Mahan.

Happy birthday, Gerry! I hope we can get together soon to compare notes and see if you were indeed my “SKYGOD” 73 years ago when I was evacuated from Honolulu to San Francisco on a Pan Am Flying Clipper.


For a wonderful collection of history, photos and data on Pan Am see: http://jpbrtransconsulting.com/category/pan-am/