

The flight that time forgot

Santo Fiumano enjoyed a 30-year career with Pan American Airways, rising to the position of Director of Ground Equipment. One memory in particular stays with him: the first commercial flight from the US to China in 1979.

Fiumano began his career with Pan Am following a stint as a plumber's helper, after which he spent time putting his automotive diploma to use. A warning from his doctor about the dangers of the carbon tetrachloride used to clean transmission parts led him to pursue another industry – and he found aviation. “I had an uncle, Vincent Calamia, who was a flight engineer based out of New York for Pan Am (and later became a pilot flying the 747) who helped me get hired as a mechanic's helper in the ground support equipment shop at Pan Am, New York City,” he relates. “My job was to service and repair any equipment that did not involve actually flying the aircraft, such as generators, air start units and catering trucks. After six years as a mechanic, I decided it was time to move up. I wasn't going to be crawling under equipment when I was sixty years old, so when the chance to become an instructor came up, teaching GSE mechanics how to service and repair the equipment, I applied and got the job. From there, my goal was to continue to move up in management.”

Age of the jet engine

“When I started at Pan Am, I was twenty. They had just recently entered the jet engine era, with the B707, B727 and then the DC-8. Finally, they came out with the B747, the queen of the sky, the best plane ever built. It seemed absolutely gigantic!” he recalls. “It was so big that it required an entirely new generation of ground equipment to service it, so a whole new concept of equipment had to be designed and distributed. Because of my background and vendor training on the 747 equipment, I was promoted to Senior GSE Engineering.”

As the first to have the 747 aircraft, the Pan Am team were also the first to experience the poor design of the new equipment. “One of the most intricate and poorly designed pieces



December 5, 1979: Fiumano (right) alongside Civil Aviation Administration of China official, prepares to board Pan Am's return flight

of equipment was a cargo lift called a Cargomatic (made by Tridair). The engine was underpowered, the electrical hydraulics and electronics were poorly designed and prone to leaks and systems failures. Repairing it was useless. It never worked right, and it kept breaking down,” asserts Fiumano. A self-professed “Thomas Edison type”, he looked for his own solution. “I set out to redesign the entire piece of equipment – I'd worked at Pan Am for twenty years by then. My new design worked better than expected. It wasn't perfect, but it didn't break down anymore. I packed it in a kit with a book to go along with it, so mechanics could put it together like a tinker toy.”

Making history

“One day my boss pulled me aside at the shop. He said that Pan Am was going to fly into

Communist China, a completely closed society, for the first time. This flight had been worked out with the Chinese government at a very high level, with Jimmy Carter's Vice President, Walter Mondale, going to China to negotiate the deal with Chinese Vice Premier, Deng Xiaoping,” he explains. “Pan Am was the only airline that was picked and I was going to be part of that history, as technical advisor and teacher of the ground equipment.”

Fiumano's boss warned him to stay out of trouble, stressing the importance of the event and of his role representing Pan Am and the US. “I was told that I would be going to China for five weeks. My assignment was to fly to Shanghai for four weeks before the actual flight, to make sure the ground equipment arrived at the docks and to make arrangements for its transport to the airport. I was to train 25 mechanics in how to

Industry retrospective

troubleshoot and service the equipment.”

But this project was far from straightforward, as Fiumano emphasises. “Back then, China was pulling itself out of a very dark time. It had survived two world wars and occupation by a foreign power. Then, in 1949, Mao Zedong created the People’s Republic of China as a communist state. The PRC was extremely hostile to the US, capitalism and the West in general. In fact, the hostility between the two countries reached a point that, in the early 1950s, the US closed its consulate in China - and didn’t come back for 31 years.”

Arrival in China

“I arrived on November 16, 1979, just before Thanksgiving. The next day, when I first met the Chinese mechanics I’d be working with, I discovered that the people were very warm and grateful, and honoured that we had come. They seemed very eager to join the twentieth century, and happy that there seemed to be a new relationship between the US and China,” he recalls.

There were a few key differences in ground handling in the new surroundings, he soon learned. “The way things were set up in China was that a mechanic was assigned a piece of GSE, such as a loader or a generator, for which he was responsible. So that piece of equipment became the responsibility of the whole family, and you’d see whole families out there washing the equipment, as if it were this extremely precious object – which it was,” he remarks. “We didn’t have a B747 to use as a demonstrator, so I used the door of a building to simulate the door of the plane. That’s how I taught the mechanics and six equipment operators.”



Smiles all round: the student mechanics under Fiumano’s tutelage pose in front of their GSE

Some things the Chinese people said surprised Fiumano. When asked why their farmers were struggling with old-fashioned tools, they replied that they feared the introduction of modern equipment would put people out of work. “Still, I had the sense this was going to be a country on the move. I saw the energy, and the people’s eagerness to learn. For my job, I’d travelled around the world and been to places that were dead poor, where there just wasn’t that feeling of energy. But China was not like that.”

US flight touches down

The day arrived when the flight came in to China: December 4, 1979. “The plane was a B747 SP Clipper Black Hawk, sometimes called Clipper Liberty Bell. This flight into China was some sort of government test flight – the flight just came in and the next day it left. You couldn’t really call it an inaugural flight, because it wasn’t the beginning of air service, it was just a single flight,” he explains. “Everybody was nervous when the flight came in, of course – the Ops people and mechanics had only had a few weeks to practise, without even having a 747 to practise on, but everything went off without a hitch – the first flight into communist China, courtesy of Pan American Airways.”

A welcome banquet followed, Fiumano reminisces, bringing together members of the Chinese Civil Aviation, the operations people, the crew in charge of the aircraft and the flight crew. “I received special mention and so did John Schumacher, the VP in charge of China,” he recalls. “He helped me get through the layers of government whenever we needed to order a part or something else. We couldn’t have done anything without Mr Schumacher.”

“I returned to the States on that flight and to my wife. All the equipment Pan Am brought over was left there: a gift to the Chinese government. One strange thing about this flight is that I’ve done a lot of research on this, talked to pilots and dug up old newspaper stories, but I could find almost



(L to r): CAAC Officer; Vice President of the Orient, John Schumacher; and his wife Audrey

nothing about it," he relates curiously. "There's plenty of information about other historical flights, such as when the US ping pong team and the New York Philharmonic flew into China, but not this flight."

End of an era

"Pan American World Airlines finally died in 1991. I can't explain to you what a sad day that was. Pan Am was more than a company, it was a family to the people who worked there. It was the beginning of aviation and the love affair people had with it," he enthuses. "One time, I decided to quit, packed up my box of stuff and was walking away from the shop – to a job that paid a lot more money – when I stopped, turned around and went back. I said to my boss that I wanted my job back, and he gave it to me."

Of all his happy memories with Pan Am, however, Fiumano concludes that the flight to China is surely his favourite – as well as earning the airline a place in the history books.

"For Pan Am, it was the honour of being

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
Pilots and other officials prepare for the return Pan Am flight

chosen by the federal government to represent our country as the first commercial airline to fly into China at a time when it had been closed to the West for more than three decades. For me personally, it was my life's greatest adventure, a chance to be part of an amazing historical moment. I was just in the right place at the right time, and I got to see and experience things few Americans – even China experts – ever got to see."

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