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## An historical look back at commercial aviation in Lafayette, 1965

By Jim Moore



Ralph Demeree and Richard Osborn, Air News Photos, 846 California Street, SF CA

Lafayette to San Francisco airport was \$5.50 and two major airlines participated with SFO, Trans World and American Airlines.

Service began in Lafayette on April 15, 1965 at a new heliport built on the hilltop behind the old Hillside Motel at 3738 Mt. Diablo Blvd. The facility was at the west end of town between Mt. Diablo Boulevard and Highway 24. It was an inauspicious beginning to say the least. The weather that year was not cooperative. Neither construction plans nor the FAA's required approach testing procedures proceeded as anticipated. As a result, practice landings were being conducted late into the night on April 14 to familiarize pilots with the approach and landing conditions of a new facility they were to begin using the next day.

On April 15, Opening Day, champagne and hors d'oeuvres were served in the heliport building while visitors lined up outside awaiting turns for free rides. Later in the evening of April 15, following additional touch-and-go landing practice at the facility, a distress signal was sent by one of the helicopters at about 7 p.m. indicating an overheating engine and the need to descend and make a precautionary landing. The pontoon-equipped aircraft was over water at the time and the two pilots prepared to set down in the water. With float gear the maneuver was not especially dangerous except that it was night and visibility was obviously limited. The pilots radioed their position report before setting up their descent into the water telling the air controller, erroneously, that they were preparing to descend into the Lafayette Reservoir and request-ing search and rescue accordingly.

In what must have been a sobering moment, the search and rescue teams arrived at the reservoir and found no evidence of the downed aircraft. The pilots had been mistaken in their position report; they were in fact over the Upper San Leandro Reservoir when the engine warning-light came on. The aircraft had descended safely into that body of water and was in the process of making a normal water landing when the aircraft struck a submerged log and rolled over. The pilot and co-pilot quickly evacuated the cockpit and climbed up on the overturned hull, where they spent a few very chilly hours awaiting rescue efforts slowed by inaccessible terrain and stormy weather conditions.

As if this catastrophe was not enough, the very next morning, April 16, another SFO helicopter crashed on the Embarcadero roadway in downtown San Francisco. This airplane, another of the Airline's Sikorsky S62 10-passenger helicopters, was downed by a reported bird strike, later confirmed by bird remains in the engine compartment. The aircraft was carrying a local radio traffic reporter, Ed Mattson, known to his listeners as Ted Taylor, and added drama was provided by his second-by-second account of what the Oakland Tribune described as an 800-foot drop onto the Embarcadero adjacent to Pier 18. Both occupants were injured in what was described as Taylor's most exciting commute report.

The new airline thus began operations in Lafayette in April 1965 with two accidents within hours of one another. An insurance company at the time estimated the odds against such an occurrence at 10 million to one.

Opening day in Lafayette was grey, intermittently rainy and blustery. Undaunted, SFO fulfilled its promise of free rides for the public with champagne, refreshments, and photographers to record the attendance of various local dignitaries. Interested local residents lined up awaiting their turn for a brief, and very bumpy, hop in the Sikorsky from which they could view their city from an altitude of several thousand feet.

It may seem difficult to imagine today, but in the early 1960s the idea of helicopter airline service connecting Bay Area hub airports and some distant suburban communities was hot. Commercial airlines had not yet been deregulated and demand for passenger service was high throughout the nation. No exception to that trend, the Bay Area became the site of one of a handful of commercial helicopter airlines, others existing in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles.

The Bay Area line, known as SFO Helicopter Airlines, came into existence in 1961 with the idea of linking San Francisco, San Jose and Oakland airports via direct service from a series of heliports situated throughout the area. Initial sites were in Marin County, Berkeley, in downtown Oakland (atop a parking garage), and at the Ferry Building in San Francisco. The airline employed Sikorsky S61 and S62 helicopters with seating capacities of 28 and 10 respectively. The price of a ticket from

Lafayette, an unincorporated city of a little more than 7,000 residents in 1965, needed the approval of the Contra Costa County Planning Commission and, ultimately, a vote of the County Board of Supervisors to amend the existing County Airport Plan to add the new heliport.

Old timers will remember the controversy that surrounded this approval process at the county seat in Martinez. For the most part the project was favored by the community and surrounding towns, all appreciating the convenience and time savings associated with direct trips to the airports high above the congestion on local freeways. There was an important exception to this favorable view, however, emanating from the retirement community of Sunset Village situated directly across the street from the new heliport. During the course of the initial approval process and during the entire three-year period during which the heliport operated, the controversy split the community. Ruptures in long-standing relationships occurred, with neighbor standing against neighbor.

The residents of Sunset Village were virulently opposed to the new facility and their appearances in the County Auditorium in Martinez at times of scheduled hearings were lively, loud and angry. A typical session in the Supervisor's chamber in Martinez was characterized by two rows of heliport proponents in the front, left-side seats of the auditorium and the balance of the room filled with Sunset Village residents. The speakers for the proponents, helicopter airline personnel trying to explain what their operational plans and procedures would be as well as private financial backers of the venture, were drowned out in a stream of loud and hyperbolic opposition. Somewhat surprisingly, the proponents won the day on a four in favor with one abstention vote of the supervisors and received their permit to build the facility.

In 1965, aviation technology was on the cusp of some important breakthroughs in the area of avionics which, had they occurred earlier, might have significantly improved the nature of the helicopter service to Lafayette. In 1965 all service into and out of Lafayette was conducted under Visual Flight Rules, the FAA's designation for flight in which the ground is visible at all times. Instrument Flight Rules, allowing flight into low or no visibility weather were not available in helicopters flying over the Berkeley Hills. This limitation became problematic in a region in which seasonal fog episodes were common, particularly in the spring of the year. When this occurred, and it did frequently, the aircraft couldn't fly. Taxi cabs had to be dispatched from around the region to come to Lafayette to pick up otherwise stranded passengers and carry them to their respective trunk airlines at the three airports. This became a major irritant to airline passengers.

Ironically, the needed technology was becoming available and was approved for use by New York Airways, a Manhattan-based helicopter airline, in February of 1965. An article in the Feb. 17 Wall Street Journal reported that the new technology, known as the Decca system, that would allow "all weather flights" had been certificated by the FAA for use in NY Airway's helicopters. The article also reported that the same system had been approved for use by the Army in the "South Vietnamese military action." The war in Vietnam, with its urgent need for emergency helicopter medical evacuations, ultimately brought the technological improvements required to evacuate wounded soldiers and marines under very adverse visibility conditions. Such technology, if available in Lafayette in 1965-68, the years of the life of the local heliport, would have allowed uninterrupted service during foggy weather.

The technical constraint, however, was far from the only obstacle facing the operation of the service. Opposition from the neighbors did not die when the County approved the operation in 1965. Indeed, it grew stronger and ultimately resulted in shortened hours of operation which had the predictably negative effect on the economics of the business. Finally, in 1968 after three years of relentless opposition, the private operators and helicopter airline agreed to shut down the operation and the facility was closed to further operations. The service was appreciated by many but vilified by (mostly) non-airline travelers in the vicinity. In the end, their efforts were successful, and Lafayette was out of the aviation business.



Overtuned helicopter in Upper San Leandro Reservoir, 1965 Photo Russ Reed, Oakland Tribune

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