

THE INVASION OF CALIFORNIA

SORAB GHANDHI

It was "D" Day. At 7.00 AM on August 6, 1996, Cecille and I were on a Delta Air Lines flight to California, with a plane change at Pittsburgh. All the passengers had boarded and we were ready for departure. Just prior to closing the cabin door, the Airport Administrator came on board and announced "Mrs.Ghandhi, your cats are now boarding the plane". He was a personal friend of Cecille's who had been fighting with him to reduce night-time noises caused by airplane testing at our local airport in Albany NY, but that's another story.

We looked out of the window, and there they were. Seven identical Airline-authorized carriers, each with a Bright Red label which said "Live Animals", slowly moved up the baggage ramp and went into the bowels of the plane. Other passengers looked with awe out of their windows, and counted all of them as they went by. There was Cassie, our black mixed breed alpha cat; Tina, our pure bred Maine Coon cat; Enrico and Natasha, our two pure bred Tonkinese brother and sister; YoYo, our pure bred female Ocicat; Schuyler, our pure breed Somali cat. Finally, our mixed breed Maharani, following up in the rear. The cargo door was closed, our plane moved on to the tarmac, and we proceeded for Pittsburgh. Here, we all changed planes for San Diego, where we arrived at 2 PM. The invasion of California had begun.

At this point, I am sure you are wondering, "Why the pure bred animals?", The answer is Feline Leukemia (FL), a communicative, fatal disease which is rampant in the East coast. Any cat, purchased from a private home with other cats, will probably catch it, and pass it along to the

others. We had gone through a number of such disheartening situations, and were down to two cats, when our vet recommended pure bred animals from a cattery or catteries. These cats are free from this disease, because they are continually monitored. At that time, only two of our mixed breed cats seemed to be immune from this disease. They were Cassie and Maharani, and we never had this problem with future cats, which were pure bred.

Returning to our story, we had purchased a home in Escondido on May 15, 1996, , within a stone's throw of Felicita park. Simultaneously, we had committed to a big Ghandhi family reunion in Albany on June 29, giving us a month and a half to plan our California trip. Our most important partner in this move was our real estate agent, Cheri Espeland, who was our loyal friend and provided many services, long after the legal documents had been signed.

Our California home was a 1965-built, ranch style building with an attached garage. In addition to the car entrance, it had a side door which opened to our back yard. Our kitchen also had a side door which opened to the back yard. We planned to use the garage for the toilet arrangements of our cats, and this immediately raised a problem; how do you transport a cat from the home to the garage in his/her hour of need? Many ideas were proposed, but we eventually decided to install a regular door between the garage and its contiguous dining room, complete with a standard (and readily available) flap-type cat door between them. Cheri took care of all the details, even hiring a reliable carpenter to do this job. It worked out so well, that it has been used by all our cats since its installation, and the regular door by us. She also made sure that our telephone, power and water were kept connected in our absence.

Next we started plans for transport of the cats to California. The obvious solution was to go by American Airlines, which had a non-stop service from Albany to San Diego.

Unfortunately, they would not permit more than four live animals on each flight. This would require us to take two flights which we vetoed, Our alternative was Delta Air Lines, but this necessitated a plane change at Pittsburgh, Problem solved? Not quite.

Delta was willing to take all seven cats in the cargo section the plane. However, no live animals could be taken if the cargo included any item needing carbon dioxide refrigeration, from flowers to coffins. This type of cargo had priority, and our cats would be thrown off at the last minute if such additional items turned up. Also, liability considerations limited holding the cats on the Pittsburgh tarmac for more than three hours between connecting flights.

In despair, we resigned ourselves to carrying our cats cross country by car. Fortunately, Cecille and our vet found that there were Animal Transport Groups (ATG) which could do the entire job, for a fee, of course. We signed up with an ATG in Albany. Here is how it operated:

Seven FAA-approved carries, labelled "LIVE ANIMALS" were delivered to us a week before D- day, with instructions that they be left open in the basement so that the cats became accustomed to them. In the meantime, the ATG worked with our vet to obtain the necessary documents showing that they were healthy, and had the required shots before flying to California.

On the morning of D-day minus Two, we loaded seven suspicious cats into their separate carriers. Cassie, being the brightest, was the least cooperative. A few hours later, an ATG member arrived and carted them away to their private kennels, where they were boarded and fed.

Next, and most important, the ATG guaranteed safe delivery to Delta a few hours before flight time. If anything happened at either Albany or Pittsburgh (bad weather, carbon dioxide in either plane, etc.,) they would take the animals back to their own kennels, and keep them well

fed, indefinitely, until they were able to ship them out. Also, they would keep in complete touch until our cats were on the final leg of their flight to San Diego. As a result, the movers could come to our house on D-day minus One, and pack up our all our stuff without worrying about the cats.

As luck would have it, there were no problems, and all went well. The nine of us arrived in San Diego on the same flight, and I went to pick up our rental van. Cecille stayed with the carriers, collecting a group of admiring cat lovers in the process, until I arrived with the van. The cats were so excited to see Cecille that they started an incessant din which did not stop until we loaded them into the van and drove to Escondido.

Our travel luggage consisted of two large suitcases filled with empty litter pans, bowls for cat food, tins of cat food and few cat toys. Our cabin luggage was restricted to personal items, and to the keys for our garage and house. Upon arriving at our new home, we opened the garage door, and found Cheri's ultimate gift; a large bag of cat litter. Keeping the cats in their carriers but inside the garage, we unloaded the suitcases, checked the entire house for open windows and doors, and then closed the garage door.

Finally, we gave the cats the freedom of the house, which they explored excitedly, once they decided that the trip was not a ruse for a mass deportation to the vet. Next, out came the seven cat bowls, in which Cecille provided a special tinned cat food as a treat. It was then that she noticed that one of the bowls was not in use. Cassie was missing. In desperation, we went over the entire house, even though it was devoid of furniture. Eventually, we heard a soft mew in the garage, and located her.

The outer garage wall was made with vertical 2" by 4" beams, covered by sheets of peg board. Cassie, evidently deciding that things were not right, had climbed up to the top of the peg board in an attempt to escape, and been trapped there. While Cecille talked to her to convince her that all was well, I rushed to our new neighbor who returned with a step ladder. I climbed up the ladder, and coaxed Cassie down to ground level so that Cecille could take over at this point.

We heaved a sigh of relief, made sure all the cats had been fed, and left them to spend the night on the carpeted floor. We drove to our motel which was close by, had a simple meal in the adjoining restaurant, and crashed for the night. The next morning my son Behram arrived from Los Angeles with a present of four plastic garden chairs and a package of plastic/paper cutlery. We spent the day shopping for necessities, which included an inflatable queen size sleeping mattress, and some perishable items for breakfast and lunch, since the previous owner had left the refrigerator running. Also, more food for the cats.

Three days later, our belongings arrived by cross country van, and were delivered into the individual rooms for which they had been planned. Before leaving Albany, I had calculated that it cost about \$1.00 for a pound of anything we shipped to California, so we only brought essential items. These included our basic furniture (a queen-size bed, kitchen table and chair set, a few other furniture items, some 300 CDs, a portable "Boom Box ", as well as our china and silverware). In addition, lots of books on Mesoamerica, and two computers. We left our 13" black and white TV set behind, and replaced it with a new 22" color unit.

A few days later, our Ford Escort car arrived, and we returned the van to its rental place. The Gandhi invasion of California was complete, more or less. It is still a work progress.