

# Neerja Bhanot

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**Neerja Bhanot** (September 7, 1964 -

September 5, 1986) born in Chandigarh, India was the daughter of Harish & Rama Bhanot and was a Flight attendant for Pan Am airlines, based in United States. She was the senior flight purser on the ill-fated Pan Am Flight 73 flight.

When five terrorists stormed the Pan Am Flight-73 at Karachi airport and took control of the aircraft, the first act that Neerja did was to shout "hijack", enabling the pilots and some other crew members to escape from the aircraft so that the plane could not be forcibly flown. She hid the passports of the passengers on the flight so that the hijackers could not differentiate between American and Non-American citizens. She laid down her life while shielding three children from the bullets fired by the terrorists.



For her bravery the Government of India posthumously awarded her the Ashoka Chakra (India's highest decoration for gallantry away from the battlefield, or not in the face of the enemy). She is the youngest recipient of the same. In 2004 the Indian Postal Service released a stamp commemorating her.

Neerja's family put her insurance money in a trust, '**Neerja Bhanot Pan Am Trust**' to which Pan Am also contributed an equal amount. Every year, this trust honors airline crew that act beyond the call of duty and Indian women who show exemplary courage as well as compassion for their fellow humans. Neerja died at the age of 22 just 2 days shy of her 23rd birthday.

### **As of 21st April 2006:**

In 1988, five hijackers were convicted by a Pakistani court and sentenced for varying periods. After his release from jail, the leader of the group Zaid Hassan Abd Latif Safarini tried to escape to Syria. Safrini was arrested by the FBI while attempting to flee from Pakistan. On October 1, 2001, Safarini was produced in court where he pleaded not guilty to the charges. On August 28, 2002, a grand jury found him and his four accomplices guilty on 95 counts and proposed that they be tried. Safarini again pleaded not guilty.

The prosecution sought death penalty for him. But the court ruled out death penalty in the case. On December 16, 2003, Safarini pleaded guilty to all 95 counts and prosecution dropped the request for death penalty. However, his lawyers agreed that he could be

sentenced to a total of 160 years (three life sentences plus 25 years). Safarini will be denied parole during this time. The other four accused are still in a Pakistani jail.

In 2006, Neerja was conferred with the Special Courage Award by the US Department of Justice. The award was received by her brothers Aneesh and Akhil at Washington D.C on April 21st. US Attorney General, Alberto Gonzales gave the award. The Special Courage Award recognizes individuals who have demonstrated extraordinary bravery in the aftermath of a crime or those who have performed a courageous act on behalf of a victim or a potential victim.

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