

A Pioneer In Developing Area

By GEN. CHARLES BLAIR, (Ret.)

Back in the early nineteen sixties, I used to contemplate St. Thomas from my front porch in St. Croix and wonder what kind of a place that strange island was. It was only forty miles away, but to me, at that time a Crucian, the mountainous island across that narrow stretch of sea was steeped in mystery.

Eventually, when I found a day to spare, the mystery was dispelled by making an expedition to that strange island by way of the airports. I was lucky to find my way back to St. Croix on the same day.

This rigorous effort to reach across the forty odd miles to St. Thomas, and return the same day, set me to wondering. There must be an easier way.

On that first visit to Charlotte Amalie, I discovered a good flying boat harbor. The Christained harbor, I already knew, was ideal for seaplanes.

So why not tie the two harbors together with a twenty minute crossing? A flying boat could certainly do it.

I had flown seaplanes in the Navy, and had been a flying boat test pilot. For years, I flew at the helm of airline boats on the Atlantic. Therefore, I was no stranger to this mode of travel.

But, emerging into the nineteen sixties, flying boats had become a scarcity. Uncle Sam had paved the world with concrete during World War II. Landplanes had become the fashion.

But landplanes couldn't offer the necessary convenience factor on the short haul between St. Thomas and St. Croix. It would take a flying boat, or a helicopter. But helicopters were, and for some time to come will be, economically less practicable than the flying boat for this route. Therefore, I went searching for a flying boat among the hundred or so such airplanes which still existed around the world.

It seemed to me, too, that seaplanes would fit better into the inter-island scene. The seas have a maximum presence in our islands, and provide an extra safety factor by offering an "airport," if needed, below a flying boat at all times. The Goose and the Catalina are renowned for their rugged performance in the open sea, flying air-sea rescue missions.

At any rate, I found a World War II Grumman Goose which had been damaged when a hangar roof fell in on it somewhere in Texas. We brought it back to life, and, on February 1st, 1964, Grumman Goose N-95467 made its first flight between St. Croix and St. Thomas, utilizing a 16-foot Boston Whaler in each of the two harbors to transfer passengers from aircraft to shore and vice versa.

To get this project underway, I used up two months of accumulated vacation from my regular job of flying Pan Am's 707s. At the end of that "vacation" I discovered I had a tiger by the tail. The Goose was obviously going to be in demand for some time to come, so I hired another pilot to take over while I was absent around the world with Pan American Airways and with the U.S.A.F.

After this, I was no longer strictly a Crucian. I became a Virgin Islander. Many others, since that time, have become Virgin Islanders.

Late in 1964, the second Goose



GENERAL BLAIR LAUNCHED Antilles Air Boats with one Grumman Goose, N95467, in February, 1964. He utilized Boston Whalers in each of the two harbors the line serviced to transfer passengers from aircraft to shore. (Photo by Fritz Henle)

arrived on the scene, and another came the following year. I would like to have stopped at three. Running a small business is much less complicated than running an airline.

But three Gooses did not meet the demand. Nor did six. Now Antilles Air Boats operates a dozen, and the headaches multiply with each arriving aircraft. The payroll has reached a million dollars a year, and we don't have enough room to park the aircraft at night.

But we couldn't stop short of doing the whole job. I had planned on running a personal style of business, and suddenly found myself operating a public utility. Fortunately, I phased out of Pan American in time to grab hold of the runaway "street-car line."

One of my headaches was especially odd. The Gooses were running too full! That should have been comforting, but it was a worry. With too many seats habitually full, we were not doing a good job of serving the public. Many people, obviously, could not find a seat on a Goose when they needed one.

Therefore, to catch the overflow, I brought a former queen of the trans-Atlantic lines to the Virgin Islands, a flying boat I had flown for years on the Atlantic. This 47-passenger, four-engine Sikorsky S-44, the first airliner to fly nonstop across the Atlantic, dramatically increased our passenger traffic for the year 1968. But unfortunately, this venerable aircraft became due for a major overhaul at the end of 1968, and ever since we have been struggling to put our 28-passenger Super Catalinas into effective service as a substitute.

The Sikorsky, as most everyone in St. Thomas knows, has, for the time being, become a museum piece on the Charlotte Amalie waterfront. Hopefully, another need for it will develop, a need sufficient to justify an expensive overhaul.

Meanwhile, the PB-5A Super Catalina is needed to carry what the Goose cannot carry during the heavily travelled morning and afternoon commuter hours. We will have three of these notably

the air-conditioning and sound-proofing, and as soon as a suitable ramp is available in St. Croix, hopefully this summer, these big boats will render good service when we are able to taxi ashore. We are also serving Fajardo with the Super Catalina, and hope to extend further into Puerto Rico.

Antilles Air Boats, after first expressing gratitude to our multitude of travellers, owes much of its position as the principal common carrier in the Virgin Islands to the helpful support of the Virgin Islands Government, from the Office of the Governor, the legislature, down through the relevant government agencies which have jurisdiction over our operation.

Without such support, we could not have achieved as much. Without continued support from the Virgin Islands Government, we could not carry on as the "street car line" of the Virgin Islands.

Moreover, it is within the capability of the Island Government to propel the operation of flying boats to new heights as a Virgin Islands Flag Line, and the world's most unique airline.

This is not likely to be within the capability of any individual. The best I can contribute is to steer the enterprise.

I am a champion of free enterprise in the normal course of business events. I have no inclination toward the socialist line of thought, but I would like to see the Virgin Islands Government become the prime mover of Antilles Air Boats, instead of myself and a few stockholders. To achieve the best measure of long-term expansion of this kind of public utility requires bringing to bear more authority and persuasiveness, when dealing with

numerous Virgin Islands and United States Government agencies, than a private corporation can muster.

Most of the offers for purchase of Antilles Air Boats so far have come from large speculative companies. I have resisted our being gobbled up by a "conglomerate" which would be likely to have little interest in flying boats or the needs of the Virgin Islands.

Certainly a tough set of business rules would need to be formulated if the Government should become involved. The Corporation would need to be non-political and run much like a private company. A watchful and authoritative eye would be needed to keep a trim payroll.

The following advantages are worth considering:

1. The certification of the airline as a regional carrier would be probable, which would allow the unlimited operation of large flying boats, within the route structure.

2. The granting of the best in seaplane base facilities along the route structure would be more certain.

3. The airline would be highly publicized, at low cost, as the Virgin Islands Flag Line.

4. The fare structure would be a government function, rather than a private determination, which I find discomfiting.

5. This kind of airline could generate money for its own expansion or other Virgin Islands needs.

And, on top of that, it could be the world's best in short-haul transportation. We could point with pride at the most unique of all airlines.

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