

# Caribbean Seaplane Commuters

story & photography by Robert C Mikesh

*The Grumman G-21A Goose was the primary aircraft for the fifteen years that Antilles Air Boats operated in the Caribbean. These were ten-passenger aircraft that required only one pilot. During their heyday, these amphibians became the symbol of activity in the Virgin Islands.*



When Grumman Gooses and Mallards provided commuter air service in the Caribbean, they were as symbolic to the Virgin Islands as cable cars are to San Francisco. Soon after this service ended in 1989, as a result of *Hurricane Hugo*, it appeared that there was a direct correlation between this disruption and the stalemated economy of the islands that is still in the stages of recovery today.

The former flying boat service that began in 1964 as Antilles Air Boats proved to be a vital lifeline that brought, for the first time, the three major US Virgin Islands closer together as a single territory, recognizing a single government, and populated by a single people. Before the start of this scheduled airline service, there were many inhabitants on all the islands who had never visited the others. These flying boats were the main element that changed all of this, starting with an affordable \$8.00 one-way or \$15 roundtrip ticket between the two major islands of St Thomas and St Croix.

Commuter air service between these two islands has returned with the use of de Havilland Canada Twin Otter seaplanes. But the nostalgia and excitement of the flying boat amphibians as they rolled from the ramp into the water, splashed onto their planing steps, then majestically soared into the blue Caribbean sky is noticeably lacking by those of us that witnessed those earlier days.

For what would develop into the world's largest seaplane airline, it all began so innocently in 1961 with the purchase of a single Goose by Captain Charles F Blair. Blair was chief pilot for Pan Am, flying the North Atlantic route between New York and London on Boeing 707s. These long flights built up crew duty hours quickly, giving him considerable time off during each

month. Moving his family from New York, he selected St Croix in the Virgin Islands on which to spend his leisure time.

Charlie Blair was widely known in aviation circles as one of America's most distinguished pilots. A Navy pilot by training, he ultimately became an Air Force Reserve brigadier general when called to active duty several times to further develop air navigation systems. He proved the validity for polar navigation by using sun lines instead of the useless magnetic compass in northern regions for his solo flight across the North Pole from Norway to Alaska in his North American P-51 Mustang, *Excalibur III*. This brought about the realization that Soviet bombers could also cross the polar region to North America without the use of magnetic compasses. Because of this, a radar detection fence was established across Canada known as the DEW (Distant Early Warning) Line.

Yet in travelling from St Croix across the 43 miles (69km) of Caribbean Sea to St Thomas to board a flight to New York was the most arduous and complicated part of reaching his home base. There had to be a simpler way. For \$10,000 he purchased a twin-engine Goose, an airplane capable of operating from runways and water, ideal for his commuting purpose and side trips to explore other Caribbean island sanctuaries. Although Blair followed this plan to some degree, the usefulness of his amphibian was apparent to others and he was often asked for transport favors. His leisure time at home in the quiet of the islands was becoming a demand in a new occupation. When absent while performing his Pan Am duties, Blair employed a pilot and five ground crew employees to continue this service. The one Goose became the nucleus for a



*This 1978 photo shows a portion of the passenger loading ramp at the AAB terminal on St Croix, complete with open air ticket counters and waiting area so typical in this part of the tropics. At its peak, AAB had up to 45 departures a day leaving this ramp.*

bonafide airline. He called it Antilles Air Boats (AAB), and officially began operations on February 5, 1964. It was in those early days that Virgin Islanders dubbed Antilles Air Boats simply 'the Goose', an affectionate nickname that stuck.

## Antilles Air Boats

No location could be more suited for this flying boat commuter service. Many surface craft had tried this ferry service, but the ocean swells ran perpendicular to the waves between the two islands and the ride was generally unpleasant. The sheltered harbor at Charlotte Amalie on St Thomas, and the one at Christiansted on St Croix to the south, faced one another, making each port the closest points between islands. This downtown-to-downtown service generally placed passengers within walking distance to intended business and shopping destinations. Otherwise it was a 20-minute taxi ride to and from the two land airports with infrequent and undependable air service in between.

It was not all convenience in those early days, as AAB had to rely upon Boston whalers to transport the passengers from the dock to the awaiting Goose that was moored offshore. It required

*The wheels have already been extended as this Goose is about to engage the ramp leading to the terminal building at St Thomas. These airplanes were powered by two 450hp (335kW) Pratt & Whitney R-985 engines.*



*Captain Charles F Blair leans from the window of a Goose belonging to the airline he founded in 1964. It was rare that a day went by that he was not on the schedule for at least one roundtrip, and generally more.*

precise timing—and often a good sense of humor—to embark and debark without loss of dignity as the little boats bobbed in the waves beside the Goose. Some 65,000 passengers were boarded and deplaned in this fashion before permanent ramps were built. The jeers from passengers were merciless if the pilot missed the rope line when approaching the buoy—and it often happened. This was a tedious job for a one-man crew, guiding the airplane to the buoy to snatch the rope line with a telescoping boat hook held in the left hand out of the window, then looping it over the cleat on the bow.

The Goose was an ideal aircraft for these waters and this type of service. When acquired by AAB, all were nearly 25 years old. Given new interiors, they could carry ten passengers, one to sit in the co-pilot seat, always the desired position.

Among the first ramps constructed was one Blair laughingly called the "smallest airport in the world." In 1966, a 67 x 100ft (20 x 30m) ramp in Christiansted was built at the end of what is now Pan Am Pavilion. To accommodate the 49ft (15m) wing span of the Goose in these tight quarters, a turntable repositioned the Goose for boarding and a rolling departure into the water. Even today at low tide, a portion of this inclined ramp can be seen at water's edge from the porch railing of Stixx on the Waterfront, that now occupies part of this location. Early morning engine starts under the windows of the adjacent Caravelle Hotel brought unhappy complaints from guests, and soon the airplanes had to move.

A more permanent base on the western edge of Christiansted was developed. This would normally accommodate at least five passenger loading positions, an open air terminal with ticket counters, the Goose Grill snack bar, a two-bay maintenance hangar with administrative offices above, and an express package office.

Over the next several years AAB continued to grow. Blair retired from Pan Am at age 60, which allowed him to devote full time to running the airline. At his right hand was an able helper, his wife and AAB's executive vice president, actress Maureen O'Hara Blair. She, too, began to share his far-sighted dream of



*For a short time, Antilles Air Boats had a Short Sandringham in its fleet for 'Flightseeing' aerial cruises out of Tortola, British Virgin Islands. Complications in obtaining US certification kept the aircraft from scheduled service.*

downtown-to-downtown service not only to additional islands but also between such major metropolitan areas as New York and Boston, where airports are so far from the business areas that taxi-time exceeds air-time.

Most of the pilots recruited in the early years were retired military men who preferred manning the controls of an airplane across these beautiful waters with a below-average pay scale than to sit behind a desk or to meander about a golf course. Blair frequently explained that a seaplane pilot had to "make" his own runway for each takeoff and landing. The chop of the waves, their direction, and wind direction and velocity, were aspects that had to be taken into consideration for each operation.

By 1967, the Gooses (never referred to as Geese) that belonged to AAB were flying 60 flights a day, 50 of them between St Thomas and St Croix. To cope with the airline's passenger demand, Blair added a 47-seat Sikorsky VS-44A, sistership to the airplane in which he had made the first non-stop trans-Atlantic flight with passengers and mail during World War II. While the big 'boat alleviated the situation for a while, Blair retired it a year later when a needed overhaul proved economically impractical. This four-engine flying boat was eventually donated to the New England Air Museum where it resides in restored condition in its pre-wartime American Export Airlines colors.

In addition to the main fleet of Gooses, AAB acquired three PBV Catalinas for a short period of time, that were used primarily for the St Thomas–St Croix route. The PBVs, together with the Gooses, flew a total of 33 roundtrips daily between the two islands in response to the increasing demands for this affordable service.

Perhaps the most exciting airplanes bought by Antilles were two Short Sandringhams in 1974. These four-engine flying boats were civilianized versions of the RAF Sunderland patrol bomber of World

War II. The Sandringhams came from Ansett Airlines in Australia where they were used on the route between Sydney and Lord Howe Island. Only one saw any service with AAB because of the lack of a US type certificate. Eventually, both were sold and one now resides in a museum in Southampton, England, and the other at Kermit Weeks's Fantasy of Flight, in Polk City, Florida.

The number of destinations serviced by AAB had multiplied, which by the Seventies included St John, both West End and Road Town on Tortola, San Juan and Fajardo on Puerto Rico, and St Martin. By the end of 1971, Antilles had flown three-quarters of a million passengers in some 100,000 regularly scheduled flights.

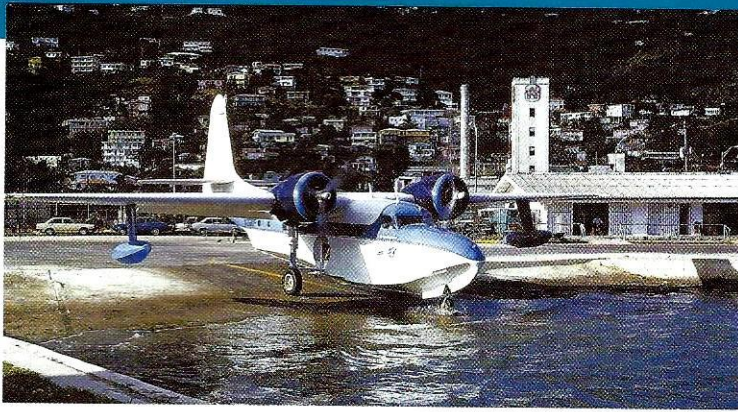
When operating at its peak with 17 Gooses, there were approximately 45 arrivals and departures a day from both St Croix and St Thomas to five destinations. A one-way ticket in 1978 between STT and STX had inched upward to \$13.50. By 1974 and AAB's tenth anniversary, a new aircraft was coming on line, the 15-passenger Grumman Mallard, more popularly known in the islands as 'Big Goose'. (From 1977, AAB pilots also flew the American Inter-Island Convair-Liners, but as these were not seaplanes this operation is not retold here—see *Airways*, August 1998.)

On September 2, 1978, this community-minded airline suffered a devastating loss when Blair and three of ten passengers on board a Goose were killed when in a crash during a routine flight from St Croix to St Thomas. A failure of one engine and the resultant damage to the airframe caused the airplane to be brought down in open water with high swells. The Goose cartwheeled and sank. This loss came as a tremendous shock to all who knew Charlie Blair.

Mrs Blair became president of the company and retired the Gooses from service for complete overhauls, relying on five Mallards to handle a reduced schedule. This caused business to

*A systematic conversion for AAB to the larger and newer Grumman G-73 Mallard was in progress by 1978. These 15-passenger amphibians required a crew of two. In its final months of operations, AAB used Mallards exclusively. This is the terminal ramp at St Croix.*





suffer as passengers found other means of reaching their destinations. During the months before his death, Blair had been negotiating the sale of the airline to Resorts International, which in time became the new owner, retaining Maureen O'Hara Blair in the position of president. At that time, Resorts was also the owner of Chalk's International Airline based in Miami (*Airways*, Sep/Oct 1995 and January 2001). Resorts had expected a new law allowing casinos to operate in the Islands and thus anticipated an increase in traffic. When this law failed to pass on its first try, coupled with operations and maintenance problems, Antilles Air Boats ceased to operate in September 1981.

## Virgin Island Seaplane Shuttle

The absence of the Goose left a major void for the Virgin Islanders that by their very sound in the harbors was reassurance of connection with the other islands of the Caribbean. That sound kept the adrenaline flowing throughout the islands and without it, much enthusiasm seemed to drain away.

Three investors from New York took up the challenge to start a new airline. Of the three, Michael (Mickey) Braunstein, as president, decided to concentrate purely on the shuttle service between St Thomas and St Croix. Other points would follow after becoming established. This became the Virgin Island Seaplane

*After a break in USVI seaplane service for more than a year, a new airline called Virgin Island Seaplane Shuttle acquired the earlier seaplane terminals and a number of former employees of AAB. Two of the AAB Mallards were used with VISS, but all aircraft wore new colors.*

*This VISS Mallard is slipping down the ramp from the St Thomas terminal headed for St Croix. At both locations, water and wind conditions were such that very little time was needed to taxi to the shore following arrival, and departures could be started a short distance from the ramps.*

Shuttle (VISS), which started operations in March 1982. Many of the former AAB employees and pilots were still on the islands and formed the nucleus of the new company.

VISS operated the Mallard exclusively. This twin-engine amphibian had graceful lines with a deep hull, giving adequate headroom for its 15 passengers. This larger capacity brought the crew requirement to two pilots. The number of Mallards continued to grow and eventually reached seven. By then the former seaplane ramps of AAB had reverted to the Port Authority by prior agreement, and were now leased by VISS.

To stay with the times, a systematic one-at-a-time schedule for the company's Mallards was to exchange their R-1340s for Pratt & Whitney Canada PT6A turboprops. A number of other modifications were made in the process, including a completely redesigned and modernized cockpit, IFR and night capability, plus air conditioning.

VISS pilots were very pleased with the Turbo-Mallard conversions that offered improved capabilities and reliability. While performance was a distinct advantage, there were other less apparent features to these 1946-vintage amphibians converted by Frakes Aviation in Clebourne, Texas. A long day of flying in the humid tropics accompanied by the penetrating sound and vibration of the Pratt & Whitney radials had a wearying effect on any pilot. Less vibration and noise coupled with air conditioning was a welcome change to crew as well as passengers.

The newly positioned PT6A engines placed the propellers higher and more forward on the airplane than with the reciprocating engines. This reduced the amount of bow spray reaching the propellers. If propeller pitch was reversed when coming off the step, very little spray reached them. The new powerplants brought the cruising speed from the former 135kt IAS to 165kt, making the red line of 205kt often too easily reached in power-on descents. Despite the fixed wing tip floats, the Mallard was regarded as an exceptionally clean-line airplane.

This conversion also raised the passenger load from 15 to 17, while still being able to carry 1,000lb (455kg) of baggage. Early

*Touchdown for the flying boats was in water protected from swells and wind by Water Island. Small boat traffic was sometimes a problem in this confined area, but the Mallards could be stopped short if and when needed.*



morning and late afternoon flights were generally filled to capacity; therefore, for the same amount of operating time, 23 more passengers could be carried over this commuter route.

No longer were the wheels on the Mallards used merely as beaching gear for ramp loading and unloading of passengers. After being well established as an operating company, VISS provided service from connecting flights at the San Juan International Airport to water landings and solid ground ramps that were convenient to downtown island destinations. The most noted advantage was direct air service from San Juan to St John, an otherwise difficult passage at best.

Senior captains with VISS were qualified in both types of Mallards. This gave scheduling the flexibility to use the Turbo-Mallard when available and fall back on the reciprocating when necessary. The preference of the flightcrews was obvious. Commuters felt assured that the Turbo-Mallards would be flying across this vital link between the islands for many years to come.

One of the three partners of VISS, Donald Lewis, became disenchanted and sold his interest then began a competing seaplane shuttle between the islands using a Twin Otter 300 on floats. This new breed of hydro aircraft, operated by Lewis Airlines, doing business as SeaJet, arrived in St Croix on Columbus Day, October 1984. The next month, scheduled service between St Croix and St Thomas started. SeaJet gave severe competition to VISS as it charged only \$20.00 one-way, as opposed to the \$29 rate of the incumbent. A second Twin Otter was added a year later, this being a Series 200, but for technical reasons this was never placed in service.

The demand for air shuttle service between downtown Christiansted and downtown Charlotte Amalie, on St Thomas, remained so high that reservations well in advance for either company were essential. SeaJet terminals were the more convenient to both downtown areas, operating from floating docks is the center of towns. However, most passengers preferred the stability of the Mallards for loading and unloading on a concrete ramp. SeaJet ended its operation a year later in 1985, after its certificate was revoked by the FAA for operating and maintenance violations.

VISS was to last only four more years. The company entered bankruptcy in 1988 and was taken over by its main creditor, Manufacturers Hanover Trust, which continued the operation. In 1989, several warnings of approaching hurricanes led to a temporary suspension of service as the Mallards were evacuated from the islands. When *Hurricane Hugo* approached on September 17, five of the Mallards were tied down on the ramp at St Croix, to wait out the storm. Unfortunately, *Hugo* turned out to be the most severe hurricane in modern St Croix history, ripping up all five



*From the onset, VISS had planned to slowly upgrade their Mallards by re-engining them with PT6A turboprops. The name 'Tropicbird' was an attempt to replace the Goose name of the former airline*

aircraft and rendering the airline buildings unusable. The total cost to replace the loss was insurmountable and brought an end to Virgin Island Seaplane Shuttle.

For years following, efforts were made to restore the seaplane shuttle service as many agreed that this was the lifeline connecting the heart of the two islands of St Thomas and St Croix. Several companies, two in particular, struggled with the bureaucracy to obtain a license to resume operations. Both planned to use Turbo-Mallards but politics kept the entire situation off balance, and licenses to operate failed to materialize.

## Seaborne Aviation

In the meantime, starting in 1992, Seaborne Seaplane Adventures had been operating a Twin Otter floatplane for sightseeing air tours of the Virgin Islands, catering to passengers of cruise ships that docked in St Thomas. The company operated from a floating dock at the Yacht Haven Marina, near the cruise ship dock, but has since moved to the earlier seaplane terminal whence it operates today.

Seaborne is a Ketchikan, Alaska-based company owned by Chuck Slagle and Ken Dole that began in 1990 by carrying cruise ship passengers on sightseeing flights over the glaciers. This was a seasonal business with limited activity during the winter. In the

*SeaJet (Lewis Airlines) became the competition for VISS in 1984 with this single Twin Otter 300 on floats. The company ended its operation a year later.*





*An arriving Twin Otter Vista Liner of Seaborne Aviation cautiously weaves between boats at anchor and the shoreline at St Croix. Oversized cabin windows give passengers a superb view.*

Virgin Islands, however, the timing was completely reversed, offering a solution to off-season problems. Slagle ferried one of the Twin Otters to St Thomas in 1992 for the winter season to offer sightseeing tours. This became a success, giving the company year-round utilization.

Seaborne Aviation leases Twin Otter 300s from Twin Otter International, a Nevada-based company. These are so-called 'Vista Liners', originally developed for Scenic Airlines for its Grand Canyon sightseeing operations. These airframes feature oversized windows, additional soundproofing, and in-flight entertainment/tour narration systems. Pilots with this company do more than just fly the airplane. They serve as the passengers' tour guide.

The political arguing continued to delay the approval of a seaplane shuttle service from the seaplane ramps in St Thomas and St Croix. However, the need for such a link between the two islands remained so strong that Slagle, as chief pilot and general manager, was persuaded by would-be passengers to provide one early morning roundtrip to St Croix and one in the late afternoon. Cruise ship passenger sightseeing flights were scheduled at midday, therefore, both requirements could be handled by the same aircraft and crew. Almost by accident, the Twin Otter shuttle service was in effect from December 6, 1994. The next season, the service was expanded with a second Twin Otter, and was followed by a third. Seaborne now has eight daily roundtrips, departing hourly, seven days a week. Fares are \$120 roundtrip for residents and \$130 for non-residents. Competing Cape Air, using Cessna 402s from airport-to-airport, charges \$144 roundtrip for non-residents.

Serving Seaborne Aviation at St Thomas is the terminal building built by Antilles Air Boats in the mid-Sixties. The ramps

*Maneuvering the Twin Otter is made possible by the reversible pitch propellers that aid not only directional control, but also backing into tight locations such as when docking. This pilot of Seaborne Aviation plays the wind from starboard for placement against this floating dock at St Croix.*

for Goose and Mallard loading remain unused, and floating docks facilitate the loading and unloading of passengers. At St Croix, a floating dock for the airline was built at the Kings Alley in downtown Christiansted. Beginning April 30, 2000, this dock was moved to the former seaplane ramp that is now void of any permanent structures. The long-term plan is to build an entire seaplane base consisting of a maintenance hangar, administrative offices, and passenger terminal. It is here that the aircraft are brought out of the water when maintenance is needed.

The company employs between 55 and 60, going as low as 35 during the summer season and up to 80 during the winter season. With an average of 16 pilots, it takes one year with Seaborne to become a co-captain, and one and a half years to become a fully qualified captain. Two pilots are required for the Twin Otters, which have seating for 17 passengers. Seaborne's average load factor is 79%, carrying from 200 to 400 passengers per day.

In mid-2000, Seaborne split the Alaska and VI operations, selling the Caribbean-based division to a group of investors, mainly from the Chicago area. Under the name Seaborne Airlines, it intends to add more aircraft and routes to Puerto Rico, Tortola, and Virgin Gorda.

For anyone who experienced the shuttle service when the Gooses and Mallards operated it, the Twin Otter is just not the same. Gone is the nostalgia of a World War II vintage flying boat, bow spray over the windshield and side windows, and the rising and settling of the 'boat on takeoff and alighting. The Twin Otter's snappy performance has it airborne before the takeoff run is recognized and its alighting is equally unexhilarating after the first time.

But for those that have flown neither, the Twin Otter ride in the Caribbean is a 'must-do' experience. There is no more exciting way to reach the other islands than by flying boat or seaplane. And best of all, there is no charge for the stunning view out of the enlarged windows of the crystal clear blue waters below, with margins of fascinating island shorelines, sprinkled with boats of all descriptions. ➔

