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August 28, 2013



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Though the Antilles Air Boats goose aircraft have not flown these waters for decades, you wouldn't have known it Tuesday as former AAB employees, passengers, friends and local dignitaries exchanged stories about the beloved goose.

The Grumman Goose G-21 aircraft was part of the territory's culture from 1963 to 1980, when the airline closed. Folks had an almost proprietary attitude about the goose. The gaily painted red and white aircraft which held 10 passengers, including the co-pilot's seat, took off as regularly as clockwork, well sometimes, the sound of their Pratt and Whitney's part of the local environment as they waddled gracelessly up the ramps on St. Thomas and St. Croix, dripping water huffing and puffing.

As V.I. Port Authority Executive Director Carlton Dowe began his remarks holding the day's program, a gust of wind snatched it out of his hand. "Wow," Dowe said, following the paper's progress far and away. "Capt. Blair is here."

Dowe related traveling to St. Croix on the goose as a Little Leaguer. "There were 40 of us going to St. Croix, and Capt. Blair arranged for us, three at a time, to travel free. He had a vision for the communities he had tied together. He would always help out with Carnival, the food fair."

Blair, an Air Force brigadier general and chief captain for Pan American World Airways, made news in 1951 when he flew a P-51 mustang solo across the North Pole, proving the feasibility of connecting both sides of the globe, before he again made news by starting what became the world's largest seaplane airline connecting something much less dramatic – two small islands in the Caribbean Sea. However, that effort launched today's seaplane fleet.

Blair ran the airline with the help of his famous wife, screen star Maureen O'Hara, until his fatal goose accident in 1978, killing himself and three others, including local educator Vern Sipio. O'Hara then took control of the company, but about a year later the airline was bought by Resorts International, an entertainment company.



The magic was gone and the airline suffered, ultimately being liquidated in 1980. Another airline, Seaplane Shuttle, acquired the ramps a year or so later and ran a service that ended with Hurricane Hugo in 1989. Seaborne Airlines began providing service in 1992.

Gary Foss, Seaborne Airlines chief executive officer and president, said his airline rides on the shoulders of what Blair started.

Without Blair's vision, we wouldn't exist today, he said. "With five employees and \$10,000, Capt. Blair started what became the world's largest seaplane airline. We owe a debt to him."

The naming of the ramp is largely the work of St. John artist Ezio Marsh, who spoke briefly. Marsh was befriended by Blair and his wife many years ago, shortly after Marsh returned from Vietnam.

V.I. Port Authority board chairman Robert O'Connor Jr. presented Marsh with a plaque honoring Blair, in lieu of Blair's family, none of whom could be on the island for the dedication.

In an emotional reference to Blair's fatal crash en route to St. Thomas in 1978, Marsh said, "Now this shows that Capt. Blair has finally reached his destination."

Reflecting on his association with Blair and his wife, Marsh said, "I've never forgotten their friendliness and their generosity to me at that time." Marsh has remained a steadfast fan.

The idea that Blair should be remembered has never left Marsh's thoughts, he said, and three years ago he saw a means of achieving this dream. He contacted local businessman realtor John Foster for help.

He told Foster, "I am shy, but I know you get things done," Foster said Tuesday.

"Ezio wanted to take the naming of the terminal to the Legislature with my help, which I was delighted to give. We approached Sen. Craig Barshinger, who wrote the legislation, and the bill was passed unanimously."

That was not the first time Foster sat in the Legislature building to hear Blair's name mentioned.

Speaking after the ceremony, Foster related meeting Blair in 1963 in Sebastian's on the Waterfront. "He told me he wanted to start a seaplane airline between St. Thomas and St. Croix. He said there were loads of World War II Grumman Gooses here and there which he could pick up with not much money."

"He asked me what I thought," Foster said. "I told him I thought he was nuts, but when he asked me to go to the Legislature with him, I went. I was amazed. The senators thought it was a wonderful idea. They saw the wisdom on Charlie's vision. They passed it unanimously."

Foster was relating old stories as he, Marsh and Foss explored placing an Antilles Air Boats display in the Seaplane terminal. "It's a great idea," Floss said, "giving us the local history."

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Thinking for a minute, deLugo laughed. "And what about our pilots! Boy, they ranged from the staid military types to the characters like 'Iggle,' Bill Mable, who'd sometimes take his German shepherd Duke in the right-hand seat."

Frank Gazarek, a former AAB mechanic, lamented the loss of Blair. But he agreed, "We sure did have a lot of fun."

Eric Miles, who used to ride the air boats with his father, photographer Ray Miles, recalled a memorable flight. "I was about 10, I think," Miles said, "and my dad and I were flying with Charlie. I was in the right-hand seat where he always let me ride, when he said he had to get something from the cabin. He reached down and grabbed a handful of flight manuals and said, 'sit on these, I'll be right back. Just keep it level.' That's not something you forget."

Marsh said he and Foster are working on an idea to name the old St. John seaplane ramp after Maureen O'Hara. Though it's not in service, Foster said it would be a "great tourist attraction." "It's a star name everyone recognizes," he said.

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