

From Gliders To Missiles

BY PAUL BACKSHALL

BEING a life insurance company executive, **Bill Mabel's** father didn't look kindly on the idea of his son flying around in airplanes, but by the age of 14 Bill was doing it anyway and was the proud owner of a glider licence.

This was the start of a career which would involve him in World War II as a fighter pilot, take him on battle missions over Korea and eventually find him hurtling through the air in a guided airborne missile simulator.

Today Capt. Mabel is one of the senior pilots with Antilles Airboats, which provides a downtown-to-downtown air shuttle service among the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and St. Martin.

His very earliest flying experience was a couple of two dollar rides in a Jenny owned by an acquaintance of his.

"In those days I was a hanger-around-a-hangar and I made friends with quite a few pilots. Unbeknown to my father, I would save up and go up for 15 to 20 minute rides."

He got his early gliding experience with **Richard Dupont** of the Dupont family, who later started the glider programme in the U.S. Army Air Corps.

When Bill's father became resigned to the fact that his son would settle for nothing less than being a pilot, he took him down to Elmira, some 60 miles from their home town of Binghamton, New York. This was one of the prime glider spots in the U.S.

"We had a winch and you hooked the rope on the end and fired the glider off the end of a hill

into the wind.

"It was a real sharp drop — pretty near a cliff though not quite."

Bill claims that gliding is the best pre-pilot experience anyone could have and he notched up some 25 to 30 hours in gliders and sailplanes as a teenager.

As soon as he turned 16, he started flying powered aircraft. A friend of his owned an OX-5 Travelaire and helped him qualify for a limited commercial licence. This enabled him to make a couple of bucks to help pay for his flying time.

When he got his full commercial licence and left school, he went into partnership with four friends and operated a Staggerwing Beach D 17 in which they took people on sightseeing trips.

"It was a fine airplane. So fast that we used to pass American Airlines. It would cruise at 200 mph," said Bill.

When he was 21, he went to Canada to join the RCAF, but as an American they made him sign a statement which meant that the U.S. could call him back if they needed him and unfortunately they did.

"When Dupont formed his glider programme, he remembered my name and after only five months in the RCAF and the RAF — I had only just got to England — I had to come back."

The glider programme, in which Bill was an instructor, was designed to provide cargo and troop transports for an airlift to Europe. The gliders were towed behind troop transport planes and could carry 15 or 16 people.

"But I had had enough of a taste of fighters by this time to want to get the hell out of gliders."

In December of 1942, he got his chance. Pilots below the age of 23 were put into an accelerated pilot

training program and in 1943 he graduated as a fighter pilot and flew P 40s and P 39s.

"I was back to being an instructor again though, this time gunnery. Once you get that tag it seems they never let you go. I spent one year and three months doing that and then went to England as a fighter pilot in the 4th Fighter Group, based at Debden, 40 miles north of London.

He survived the war years and many missions, mainly escorting bombers over Europe.

"I got shot up, but never down," he said, "and I ran into plenty of flack."

He was about to be transferred to the Pacific to fight the Japanese, when the war ended. But he was to get to Japan later.

In the meantime, he went back to the U.S. and got out of the service when his first wife died. After a brief stint in the insurance business with his father back in Binghamton, he joined up with a seaplane operation in the northern part of New York state, flying hunters up to the lakes.

In September 1948, he was recalled to the Air Corps and sent to Japan to join a defence squadron based just outside Tokyo.

"It was just across the water from Korea and when that started, I went on bombing and strafing missions.

"They called it the commuter's war. I would commute with the others based in Japan, play war for a week and then go back for R and R with the family."

If you ask Bill what happened in Korea, he will reply bluntly: "Nuthin'." Then add: "I blew up a couple of trucks, shot at a couple of tanks, bombed a bunch of stuff and dropped a lot of napalm. But you see the film afterwards and it

shows the hits but not the aftermath, so you never know what you really did. I suppose we shot up a bunch of North Koreans, but at the time we didn't know who the North was or who the South was because nobody really knew where the hell the bomb line was."

Bill went back to the States at the end of his tour and someone in Washington discovered he had a sea-plane rating. He was assigned to Westover Air Force Base and into a rescue squadron operating the Grumman Albatros, a craft about one third larger than the size of the Mallard Bill flies now for Antilles. The only trouble with that was they were so short of crews that they never got any time off and were constantly on standby.

In June of 1954 when Bill had been out of the service again for about a year, he landed a job with Bell Aircraft as an engineering test pilot. The firm had built and was testing a GAM 63 air-to-surface missile. A pilot-controlled F 80 jet aircraft simulated the guided airborne missile and, with Bill at the controls, would be launched from B 50 or B 36 jet bombers "bailed" from the Air Force.

The object of the exercise was not to have Bill operate his controls, but allow the mother aircraft to guide the missile simulator as if it were the real thing, towards an imaginary target area for a "nuclear attack."

The launch from the "mother" aircraft took place approximately 100 miles from a target. The "missile" would then relay what it was looking at through a radar link with the mother aircraft, which would guide it into the target zero.

"This was called a crew saver, since the crew in the mother aircraft didn't want to be sitting over the target area when the missile hit."

It was Bill's job then, to bring the missile simulator back. Of course it wasn't always as smooth as it sounds. The boys in the mother aircraft were learning the ropes and made one or two slip-ups.

"Occasionally they would tell me to prepare for a 10 degree left turn and then move the stick right, which caused me to bang my head into the side of the airplane."

After the test run, the missile simulator would return to the mother plane, join up with it and return to base.

"Some pilots had difficulty with this link-up, but this was how I earned

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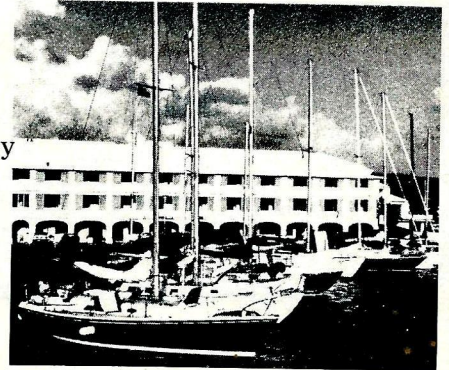
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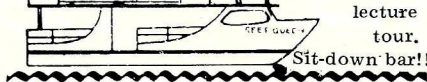
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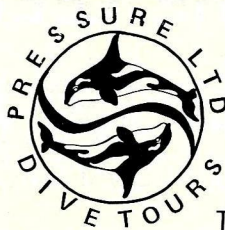
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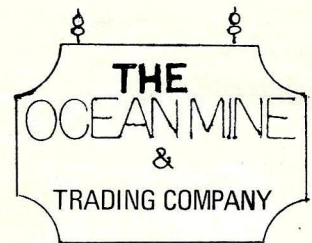
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CARIBBEAN SEA ADVENTURES

B.V.I. CONTINUED

However, I have noticed a certain change in attitude, shall I say, which is not endearing. But who's to blame? Yes, the locals may try to date you and you may not be interested, but maybe the last five tourists before you were. As one Tortolian woman put it, "Some of these Americans come down and hang all over our men in public, but if they were home in suburbia they would make them go around to their back door."

Other complaints from visitors are that some shop girls and hotel employees are anywhere from taciturn to rude. I have seen this, yet I have experimented. If you approach them with a "good afternoon," (not "hi" or "hello") smile and speak slowly rather than, say in a New York staccato, you should receive a lovely reception. However B.V. Islanders should note, that it only takes a few bad reports filtering back to the Stateside travel agencies to have would-be visitors turned away in droves.

Back to the pluses and it's good to see that both the Lions and Rotary are having some more of those clean-up campaigns. A really good anti-litter brain-washing campaign from the grade schools up would do most good. It proved very effective in the States.

Now that I have you so intrigued with the British Virgins that you are ripping your luggage out of the closet, I suspect I ought to tell you how to get here.

There are no flights directly from the States to the B.V.I. which is nice. It means it won't be too crowded when you get here. From mainland America you can either fly into Puerto Rico or St. Thomas. From San Juan it is All Island Air, Prinair or Air B.V.I. into Beef Island. From the U.S.V.I., take Antilles Airboats, known to us all as the

Goose, which runs several flights daily out of St. Thomas to downtown Road Town, saving a long trip from the airport at Beef Island. There is also one flight a day out of St. Croix to West End, which is that best-beach area I was telling you about.

Of course there are regular scheduled flights from either San Juan airport, or if you jet all the way down to St. Thomas, out of there too. Dorado Wings and Air B.V.I. go into Virgin Gorda. Air B.V.I. and Prinair are the major carriers from San Juan or you can take the Goose from San Juan too, but it's a taxi ride from the airport.

Greenback dollars are used here and you will need proof of U.S. citizenship such as voter's registration, birth certificate or, best of all, a passport.

A cruising permit is now required from anyone cruising in B.V.I. waters by charter boat and there is a new head tax of 75 cents per head per day for those on locally-based charter boats and \$2.00 for overseas-based charter boats.

By now, most people have heard that the B.V.I. has become the bareboat center of the Caribbean. If you think our islands are beautiful you should sail our waters. For many, it is the only way to go. Complete listing of bareboat charters is available from the Tourist Board or you can write direct to any of the companies advertized on our pages.

I recently sailed aboard the *Flying Cloud*, a proud old sailing ship run by Windjammer Cruises, to investigate the islands mentioned as well as the even less developed ones like Salt and Norman Islands. I had a fine time and am writing about that whole trip next month. Meanwhile, I hope to see you all over here before then.

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MISSILES CONTINUED

the nickname 'Iggie' after Al Capp's 'Bald Iggie' cartoon."

After some work with Bell on the automatic landing system for the Navy and Air Force, during which time he first met **Nick Castruccio** (now Chief Pilot with Antilles) who was working on its design, Bill left the company and went back to Binghamton where he got involved in rental and charter work.

He saw an advertisement in a trade magazine which sought pilots for the new seaplane airline started by **Capt. Charles Blair** in the Virgin Islands and moved down here in February of 1967.

He now lives in St. Croix with his Welsh-born wife **Lorna**. Bill was instrumental in bringing the Mallards into service with Antilles and he has stuck with this aircraft ever since.

He rates his job as "the best fun flying job there is," and with the experience he has behind him, he should know.

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