

DAVID F. HOWARD

Dave was born in Torrance, CA, on November 12, 1928.

At a young age he became interested in aviation, electronics, the sea, and in amateur radio which lasted until the end of his life.

After obtaining his commercial radio-telegraph operator license, he lied about his age to join the Merchant Marine. At the age of 16 Dave was the only radio officer on a 10,000-ton tanker in both coastal and foreign trade. He visited much of the world and learned about shipboard operations, navigation and seamanship.

Following a voyage in 1946, Dave flew home in a chartered DC-3. He decided he wanted to be a pilot and started taking flying lessons during the summer of 1946, quitting only when his funds were exhausted.

A neighbor who was a Coast Guard officer encouraged Dave to take the entrance exam for the U. S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut. He scored high on the entrance exams, and became a cadet in 1947.

Dave enjoyed his time at the USCG Academy. In addition to his studies, he was very active in operating the Academy Amateur Radio station. A highlight of his time there was making a 9,115-mile cruise aboard the "Eagle," a three-masted square rigger training ship. They visited the Azores, London, England, the Canary Islands, and Bermuda.

Upon learning that his class of 1951 would not be able to go to flight training due to budget cuts, he decided to resign from the Academy and join the Air Force. He started flight training in the T-6 Texan aircraft in 1950.

Dave had an interesting and challenging career in the Air Force, where he flew a large variety of airplanes.

Steve Kern, a fellow pilot and friend of Dave's at American Inter-Island, told me recently that he was reading MUSTANGS OVER KOREA when he found photos of Dave and an account of Dave making an emergency parachute jump over enemy territory when his F51 Mustang was shot down over enemy territory. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, several Air Medals, and a Purple Heart.

In 1966 Dave was assigned to Vietnam as a C-123 pilot. He was the flight leader for ferrying four C123s from Florida to Saigon. During his tour in Vietnam he was chief pilot of a unit which provided airlift into forward areas. They flew in mountainous terrain with very poor weather and extremely primitive airfield and approach facilities.

Following his retirement from the Air Force, he was determined to find a flying job. George Ruddell, who had also been an Air Force pilot, encouraged Dave to apply for a job flying with him at Antilles Air Boats in the U. S. Virgin Islands.

Dave thought that would be the perfect opportunity to combine his love of flying and sailing.

The job offered many unexpected opportunities besides making scheduled passenger flights in the Grumman Goose.

He was soon training new pilots and giving flight checks, also.

After an American Airlines Boeing 727 crashed landing at St. Thomas on April 27, 1976, the American pilots refused to fly into the short (4,658 foot) runway until the runway was extended. Thirty-seven passengers and two flight attendants were killed and another 38 passengers and 3 crew members were injured.

Captain Blair requested that Dave, who had flown the Convair 440 in the Air Force, come to St. Croix to meet a representative from American Airlines to discuss starting a shuttle service from the airports in San Juan and St. Croix to transfer passengers to St. Thomas. By the end of their discussion, it was agreed that Dave would organize and act as Chief Pilot for American Inter-Island until the runway was safe for jets to land there.

Dave continued flying the Goose when his schedule at American Inter-Island allowed, and was enthusiastic about the training Charlie Blair was giving him to fly the giant, 4-engine Sandringham Flying Boats he had bought and ferried to the Virgin Islands with the intent of giving "Flight Seeing" tours in the Caribbean in the winter and in Ireland during the summer months.

Charlie asked us if we wanted to go to Ireland to work with him in the summer of 1978, and also told Dave that when Antilles Air Boats made the transition from the Grumman Goose to the larger Grumman Mallard, he would hire me to fly as co-pilot with Dave. That would allow us to have the same days off to go sailing.

Dave submitted his resignation to American Inter-Island, and set about convincing another Convair pilot, Vincent Sipple, to take his place as Chief Pilot. He said Vince was their best Convair pilot, and also had experience training pilots on the Convair when he was in the Navy.

He brought Vince home for dinner on our sailboat one night to continue this discussion, but Vince insisted he just wanted to fly and not be stuck behind a desk doing paperwork. I couldn't help but laugh as I knew Dave felt the same way!

The following day we left for a one month vacation, looking forward to sailing our boat through the U. S. and British Virgin Islands.

When we returned, I had a letter from a magazine I had sold an article to with a large check due to the fact that they were using one of my photos (a picture of Dave) on the cover. The cover photo doubled my usual pay.

Dave was checking out a new pilot on the Goose, and I flew with them the morning of April 5, 1978.

Dave told me that when he returned that afternoon we would go out for dinner to celebrate. When they didn't return on time, I didn't worry because I thought they must have been given another flight or had a maintenance problem.

When a girl came from the office and told me that they needed to see me in the office of Ron Gilles (above the hangar), I did worry. Ron told me that Dave and the new pilot had departed Cruz Bay, St. John, and they could not make contact with them. They were organizing a search party to look for them.

I sat in Ron's office that night as both planes and boats went to look for them. Finally, someone came to say that a boat had picked up survivors but had seen no sign of the Goose or the pilots.

As the search continued the next few days, Charlie Blair came to the boat to talk to me. He said he realized how distressed I must be by all the news in the papers, and he offered to set up interviews with the newspapers on St. Thomas and St. Croix and also a radio station asking that the search be discontinued. I agreed, thinking that all the publicity would not aid in finding them.

Soon after that two brothers who were active in diving came to see me. As I recall, they were the ones who rescued the passengers in the middle of the night after the crash. They said they had seen my request, but they knew how to find the plane.

They told me that an Antilles pilot had come to see them and told them that the Goose pilots knew where the plane was because they could see the oil slick on the water. He said that Captain Blair didn't want anyone to find the plane because it was overdue for maintenance, and they would be fired if he found out they had told anyone.

I told them to go ahead and dive on the area and let the news-media know where they had discovered the wreckage.

I felt like I had been betrayed by a good friend.

They found the plane, but Dave's body was never recovered.