

Feb. 1, 1999

Dear Dwight,

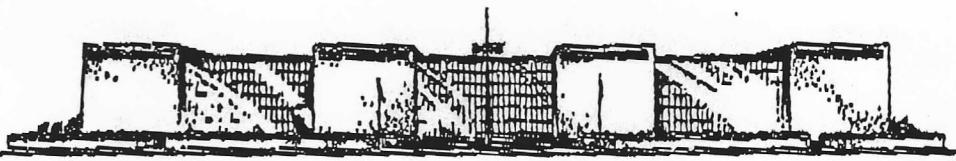
I ran across this in my *Air & Space*, a publication of the Smithsonian Institution - I don't know if you get it? Apparently, you and your better half could pop down to Hartford and see a restoration of one of the sea planes that your Uncle owned years ago. What ever happened to your cousin that was with us that summer in Gulliver, the best looking Blair of the family for sure.

We continue to make plans for our move to the northwest. House design, picking out siding, roofing, kitchen cabinets, flooring, etc., etc. We will put this house up of sale in March. It isn't a good market, but five houses on our little street have been sold in the last 8 months.

We read with interest about your son, the engineer, who is assisting on the destruction of the dams on the Elwha River. Our lot is about half way between the Aldwell Lake Dam and the straits. Our bluff on the east side of the Elwha River is some 150-200 ft. above the river, and one can not see the river or the dam from the back of our lot. I don't even know if we own the land all the way to the river - about 2/3 of our lot is down the slopes of the bluff. I doubt we go to the river and I know I'll never walk down that slope.

Here is Margaret's phone number (360-     ). If your son is in Port Angeles and is need of a golf game or a drink at one of the local spots, have him give her a call.

*Bob Baker*



## Restored Luster

**I**gor I. Sikorsky designed and built three VS-44A seaplanes for American Export Airlines. AEA named the seaplanes *Excalibur*, *Excambian*, and *Exeter*, and they were first flown in 1942. With a giant high wing and four Pratt & Whitney 1,200-horsepower Twin Wasp engines each, these great seaplanes were the first aircraft to fly mail and passengers across the Atlantic nonstop.

*Excalibur* was lost in a takeoff accident in October 1942. *Excambian* and *Exeter* were placed in wartime contract service for the Navy and flew people, cargo, and mail across the Atlantic until October 1945, when the civil DC-4, a fast land-based airliner, eclipsed the slower flying boat. The two surviving VS-44As were sold and flown in charter service in South America. *Exeter* crashed in 1947 during a night landing on the Rio de la Plata while carrying a load of arms for Paraguayan rebels, and *Excambian* was later stored near Lima, Peru.

Wilton R. Probert, president of Avalon Air Transport, which flew Grumman Goose amphibians between Long Beach, California, and Catalina Island, bought the *Excambian* in 1957 and added it to his fleet. Known as "Mother Goose," *Excambian* plied the short 21-mile distance day in and day out until 1987, when former naval aviator Charles Blair and his wife, actress Maureen O'Hara, bought the seaplane for their own company, Antilles Air Boats, operating it inter-island from a base at St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. Blair may have had his eye on the airplane for personal reasons: As an AEA pilot, he had made his first flight in a VS-44A in 1942.

The Blairs' sentimental attachment ultimately resulted in their donation of *Excambian* to the National Museum of Naval Aviation in Pensacola, Florida, in 1978. Two years later, Charles Blair was killed while landing a Grumman Goose. In 1983, Maureen O'Hara, with the help of National Air and Space Museum curator Robert Mikesh, arranged for *Excambian* to go on permanent loan to the Bradley Air Museum (since renamed the New

England Air Museum) in Windsor Locks, Connecticut. The once-proud *Excambian*, now tattered and forlorn, was transported by ocean-going barge from Florida to the Sikorsky Memorial Airport in Connecticut and then moved to a hangar not 500 yards from where it had been built 36 years before.

On November 4, 1987, Eugene Buckley, chief executive officer of Sikorsky Aircraft, pledged his company's support and began what would become an 11-year restoration led by retired Sikorsky employee Harry Hleva. During this time, a team of 118 retirees worked as volunteers; of this group, 28 would pass away before the project could be completed. A number had helped to build *Excambian*, and all labored with dedication. Joe LoSardo worked on the bulkheads and formed the new windshield in his kitchen oven. Vic Politi restored the radio operator's station, while Greg Fulmara and Dom Palumbo re-skinned and put finishing touches on the hull. The flight deck and cabin interiors were completely restored, and the seaplane was painted its original silver.

Finally, *Excambian* was complete and was moved by road to the New England Air Museum. Last November 19, former owners, pilots, stewardesses, and other crew members came from far and wide to join the restoration crew and company employees for the recommissioning. It was a true family affair, with 800 attending. At the dedication ceremony, I was honored to join Larry Churchill, president of the Connecticut Aeronautical Historical Association, Eugene Buckley, and Maureen O'Hara on the dais in front of the gleaming *Excambian*. While the airplane is complete and ready to fly, she will take wing only in the imagination of visitors who come to see this great and historic seaplane. I'm not sure I do justice to this restoration of a classic flying boat in these few words, but *Excambian* is a tribute to all who have been associated with her.

—Don Egen is the director of the National Air and Space Museum.

*Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution  
I. Michael Heyman*

*Editor  
George C. Larson*

*Executive Editor  
Linda Mueser Shiner*

*Senior Editor  
Patricia Trenner*

*Senior Associate Editor  
Perry Turner*

*Associate Editors  
John Sotham  
Diane Tedeschi*

*Photography/Illustration  
Caroline Sheen*

*Design Direction  
Phil Jordan  
Gretchen L. Maxwell*

*Cover Design  
Harry K. Whitver, Art Ink*

*Publisher  
Ronald C. Walker*

*Administration  
Carey O. Randall, Associate Publisher*

*Advertising  
Louie C. Kolenda, DEO LLC*

*Circulation  
Caroline Topak, Marketing Director  
Elizabeth Hopkins, Planning Director  
Andrea Sole, Fulfillment Director*

*Production  
Sarah D. Kingsley, Manager*

*Business  
Sheila Perry Brannum, Manager  
Frances Jackson*

*Founder  
Walter J. Boyne*

*Publisher Emeritus  
Joseph J. Bonsignore*

*Editorial: (202) 287-3733  
fax: (202) 287-3163  
e-mail: editors@airspacemag.com  
Advertising: (415) 454-9782  
fax: (415) 454-9785  
e-mail: airspacemag@marinternet.cc  
Web site: www.airspacemag.com*