Antilles Air Boats, Inc.

STATEMENT TO THE PUBLIC

With reference to the recent open sea landing accident, a factual comment is needed so that the public will not draw erroneous conclusions about our airline and its operations.

It is necessary that the community we serve be given the opportunity, in some fair and impartial way, to take a look behind the scenes at Antilles Air Boats, including the results of our own inquiry.

Our first need is to straighten out the use of the word "boasting" about our safety record, which was used in a St. Thomas newspaper. Airline managements as a rule, although they may publish numerical safety statistics, tend to be just the opposite of boasters! We approach our task of carrying the traveling public with a great deal of humility.

This humility is a natural product of the fact that there are inherent dangers lurking in all forms of transportation, although flying safety everywhere has significantly improved throughout the years, almost every airline in the world which has been operating for a long time, and which has carried large numbers of passengers, has suffered the agony of passenger fatalities, an agony we also feel for bereaved families and relatives.

We believe that the use of amphibian aircraft in island communities is certainly the safest and most prudent form of inter-island travel.

Under almost all circumstances the amphibious aircraft we use can be landed safely in the open sea if an emergency should arise. Seaplanes, too, are not normally subject to the added hazard of fire and explosion associated with many landplane accidents. Seaplane, also, have longer runways than landplanes, with water runways being relatively free of obstructions at the far end.

On or about the first of march this year we will carry our two millionth revenue passenger in somewhat over twelve years of operations. We have performed 300,000 revenue flights during that time period and are now operating close to 40,000 flights a year. During those years, and those 300.000 flights, and 2,000,000 passengers carried, we have suffered seven fatalities in two accidents, all of which were caused by drowning, largely because of slow speed of rescue. It would certainly be most helpful if high speed rescue facilities could be available to all inter-island traffic in our island community.

We are deeply grateful to the boat crews that arrived on the scene, rescuing five survivors from the sea, as well as the helicopter crews who made a great effort.

The fact that we have operated for nearly five years and 175,000 flights, carrying 1,200,000 passengers without a significant incident, made this recent accident stand out in stark contrast to the routine of many years of accident free operations We assure you this is not boasting. It is a matter of perspective, which has been somewhat scarce in recent days, in particular when one considers the number of casualties in local vehicular and boating accidents.

Taking a look behind the scene at Antilles Air Boats there has been significant development during these recent years. First of all, following our only other significant accident in June, 1971, we changed our pilot policy to one requiring a greater depth of experience. No pilot has been employed in recent years unless he has had more than twenty years of vigorous flying, with an excellent record. In fact all pilots who have come to us during these years have distinguished flying back grounds in the Air Force or Navy. As a result we have a flying staff possessing a degree of excellence not exceeded by any airline anywhere. The entire pilot group as it now stands, has that needed depth of experience. This policy has helped give us a long period of accident-free operations.

During these recent years we have also achieved a considerable advance in the sphere of maintenance, acquiring two hangars in St. Croix, a small hangar in St Thomas, plus a rental of a part of the former Naval Air Station at San Juan which includes a hangar large enough for two four-engine flying boats along with many Goose aircraft, as well as associated maintenance machine shops. Our maintenance staff totals approximately fifty employees, of which a large proportion are licensed airframe and power plant mechanics with long experience on the Goose.

We say this because the degree of criticism of the Grumman Goose aircraft and its associated maintenance has reached a high pitch for no valid reason. The Goose is famous for its rugged simplicity, and properly maintained as they are, these aircraft will be capable of providing reliable transportation for years to come. Moreover, the engines which power the Goose are noted for their great dependability, manufactured by Pratt and Whitney, the world's largest aircraft engine manufacturer.

Questions have also been raised about the aircraft's performance on one engine. We can easily demonstrate that a fully loaded Goose flies effectively on one engine.

On the occasion of last week's open sea landing, the investigation has revealed that the starboard propeller inadvertently went to its feathered position without the propeller control being activated, thus automatically shutting down the right engine, through no fault of the engine. This type of propeller, incidentally, is standard equipment on tens of thousand of aircraft throughout the world. The propeller and its acessories are delivered to us as certified equipment, the inner components of which are serviced only by the manufacturer. This problem is now being analyzed by the National Transportation Safety Board, which will be issuing a report when the findings are complete.

This engine shut-down took place at a point somewhat closer to St. Croix than St. Thomas. The aircraft was crusing at 700 feet, below normal cruising level because of low clouds and showers in the area.

The pilot, using increased power on the left engine, continued to cruise at 700 feet, at single engine airspeed, feeling confident during the first few minutes that there would be no serious problem reaching St. Croix. However, squally weather around him, with its associated unstable air mass, it is apparent he flew into an area of descending air (downdraft) which is not uncommon with showers in the vicinity.

It is a fact of aviation life that there is ALWAYS a bottom to such descending or subsiding air, except in tornado or waterspout conditions which are easily avoided when flying under visual conditions. Otherwise, subsiding air always "bottoms out" above the surface of the sea or land, more than sufficient to sustain a fully loaded Goose flying on one engine to its destination.

When there was approximately five miles to go to St. Croix, at 200 feet above the sea, the pilot was not satisfied with the subsiding air problem, and declared by radio his intention to land in the open sea. committing the aircraft to land. The sea, as we know, was very rough on that day.

The pilot has stated that the landing was made parallel to the major swell, but apparently a secondary swell condition moving from the east caused severe bouncing. Engine power on the left engine was applied, unintentionally, or otherwise, which is the almost certain cause of the aircraft overturning. The Goose can float indefinitely when right side up. When upside down in the sea it had limited flotation, although enough time was available for all passengers to evacuate; as the pilot stated did happen.

The actions of the pilot, doing everything he possible could in the water, were courageous. But the sea conditions were difficult. Back at the St. Croix base immediate attempts were made to call the Coast Guard and to alert everyone available who had a suitable rescue craft which could operate in heavy sea conditions. We also dispatched several aircraft to circle the area. the first of which was over the area shortly after the open sea landing.

It is the conviction of those of us who have long time service in the Goose that the aircraft could have proceeded to St. Croix if it had descended to "ground effect" level at approximately fifty feet above the sea where, unstable, descending air bottoms out, as previously discussed. In fact, an almost identical propeller incident took place several years ago half way across from St. Thomas enroute to St. Croix with ten passengers aboard. On that occasion the pilot elected to proceed near the surface of the sea where he rode the "ground effect" safely into St. Croix..

However, this is a matter for pilot judgment, and he had to choose what he considered to be his best option. The pilot was operating in difficult circumstances. He exercised his option to attempt a difficult open sea landing. We are not questioning the judgment of the man who was on the spot. This captain is a veteran of 12,000 flying hours. with 1700 hours in the Goose.

We hope that what has been said here will help everyone interested in this matter to have a clear understanding of what actually happened, based on factual evidence, instead of conjecture founded on erroneous assumptions and gossip. We normally await the reports of the Federal agencies, but there are times when questions of high public interest need to be clarified when they have been blown a long way out of proportion.

No one is more aware, or more dismayed, by the tragic aspects of the accident, than we are. For twelve years we have been doing our best to carry the public safely and conveniently among the islands. The reason for Antilles Air Boats being in existence has been the convenience and safety of our downtown to downtown service.

Antilles Air Boats has furnished the principal mode of travel among our islands for a long time. We like to think we are helping the operation of our community, and we will continue to serve as long as the public wishes to travel with downtown to downtown convenience.

ANTILLES AIR BOATS, INC.

By: Charles F. Blair
President