

# The Last Winged Sikorsky



By David L. Johnston

*Excambian* departs Avalon Bay, Catalina Island in 1963. (Photo by Gene Smith of Gene's Photo & Rock Shop - Avalon)

Those readers who were fortunate enough to have read the excellent article by Ed Martin in the *AAHS Journal* - Vol. 63, #1, Spring 2018 (*American Export Airlines & Sikorsky VS-44A*) should be interested in the further adventures of the three giant flying boats that were launched early in WWII. Those airplanes were the last to be built by Sikorsky. After that, Sikorsky only built helicopters. The three VS-44A seaplanes built for American Export Airlines were: *Excalibur* (N41880), *Excambian* (N41881 - pictured above), and *Exeter* (N41882).

Only one Golden Age flying boat is still in existence - it is *Excambian*, N41881. She now resides in a beautiful, restored state at the New England Air Museum (NEAM) in Windsor Locks, Connecticut. Sikorsky N41881 (referred to in this article as '881') is the only remaining American-built, commercial, transoceanic, four-engine flying boat. Today, all the other giant seaplanes built in the U.S. - the Boeing 314s, the Martin M-130s, and all of the other big Sikorsky flying boats are now gone - except for 881. As discussed in the Spring 2018 article, all three VS-44As flew across the Atlantic during WWII for the U.S. Naval Air Transport Service (NATS). *Excalibur* (880) was lost during takeoff from Newfoundland in 1942 and *Exeter* (882) crashed in 1947 during a night landing near the mouth of the Rio de la Plata while running guns to the Uruguayan rebels. Near the end of WWII, the U.S. Navy had returned the two remaining VS-44s to American Export Airlines (AEA) who briefly



Advertisement promoting Nash automobiles, Kelvinator refrigerators, Pratt & Whitney high-altitude engines, Vought-Sikorsky Flying Boats, and Hamilton Standard Propellers. (from *National Geographic Magazine* - 1942).

flew them on passenger routes across the Atlantic. AEA sold the two flying boats to Tampa-New Orleans/Tampico Airlines toward the end of 1945, who used them for charters and by the spring of 1947, Tampico sold both VS-44s to Skyways International. By August 1947, 881 was the last VS-44 to carry on with different airlines in the late 1940s and beyond.

## Three Men

Three men played major roles in the history of 881; Charles Blair, Huestis Wells, and Richard Probert. Charles (Charlie) Blair filled a most important role as he was the original AEA/Sikorsky test pilot and later, AEA chief-pilot during most of the WWII transatlantic crossings. Postwar, Blair used his vast knowledge flying the Sikorskys when he participated with different airlines in the late 1940s to the early 1950s and, by 1968 he and his wife Maureen O'Hara Blair obtained ownership of 881 when they added the

ship to their Antilles Air Boat (AAB) fleet in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Early in 1969, 881 had her final flight when she was damaged during a landing accident at St. Croix, V.I. After that, the still-damaged *Excambian* sat in the outside salt air at the AAB seaplane base for the next half-dozen years, until she was donated in 1976 to the Pensacola Naval Air Museum with her ultimate destination to be the New England Air Museum in Windsor Locks, Connecticut.

Huestis (Hugh) I. Wells had an amazing career during the early days of aviation. During the 1920s and 1930s, Wells was at various times: an airmail pilot, the chief test pilot for Fokker USA, the Chief Engineer for Pan Am, and an airline trail-blazer in South America (check out *Aircraft of the Chaco War* by Don Hagedorn and Antonio Sapienza - 1997). In 1949, Wells entered the life of 881 when he purchased the flying boat and then invested over \$250,000 in her repair and refitting. The plan was to use the big boat in a trading scheme importing native crafts from tribal natives in the Amazon River area in exchange for finished goods from the U.S. The proposed route from Baltimore, Md., to Lima, Peru did not work out and 881 was transferred to Aviation Exchange Corporation (AEC) when the seaplane became marooned on a beach at Ancon Harbor - just north of Lima, Peru in 1956.

Beginning in the early 1930s, Richard (Dick) Probert owned a succession of airplane enterprises in Southern California including Probert School of Aeronautics based in Van Nuys, California. There, Probert taught several Hollywood movie stars how to fly - including Richard Arlen and Andy Devine. Over time, Dick formed partnerships - first Arlen-Probert Aviation and later, Probert-Devine Aviation Corporation. Following December 7, 1941, Probert served with the U.S. Army Air Transport Command flying converted B-24s (C-87s) to points all over the South Pacific war zone.



*Co-owners of Avalon Air Transport - Walt von Kleinsmid (left) and Dick Probert hold a plaque from the citizens of Avalon commemorating their service to the community. (Photo from the Dick & Nancy Probert collection).*

Following WWII, Probert set up a flight training business for those veterans who were taking advantage of the GI Bill. By 1952, the GI Bill pilot-training boom had dried up so Probert invested the proceeds from his flight school and began a completely new enterprise - establishing Avalon Air Transport (AAT). AAT started with just one Grumman Goose flying between Long Beach, Calif., and Avalon Bay on Catalina Island. By 1957 Probert and AAT co-owner Walter B. von Kleinsmid were operating a fleet of Grumman Gooses when they heard about 881 sitting on the beach in Peru. Since the Gooses then only carried nine passengers, they figured that adding the Sikorsky (with its possible seating for 47 passengers) would really help with the high-traffic summer season.

### **Bringing 881 back to the US**

After negotiating with Aviation Exchange Corporation (the current owners) Dick Probert and Walt von Kleinsmid signed an agreement for the purchase of 881. The only "minor" step left for taking possession was that the plane had been sitting in the sunshine on the beach in Peru for about 18 months - and it was about 4,000 flying miles away (with about 1,200 miles of open ocean flying) to get it to Long Beach, California. Probert flew to Lima with cash and a mechanic. The flight



*Dick Probert (left) and his crew at the nose of a C-87 in the Philippines during WWII. (Photo from the Dick & Nancy Probert collection).*



*Work proceeds in Ancon Harbor readying 881 for the flight north to Long Beach, California. (Photo from the Dick & Nancy Probert collection).*

engineer (Henry Ruzakowsk) for AEC had not been paid and still lived near where the Sikorsky was beached. Ruzakowsky had retained part of the beaching gear (and wore a holstered sidearm on his hip) so that the plane could not be removed from the beach until he had been paid his back wages. Probert paid the flight engineer and began assessing the reconditioning and repairs necessary to get the ship to Long Beach. Following the assessment, he returned to the U.S. to obtain more cash and also make arrangements with Reeves Field (the old WWII Naval Air Station on Terminal Island - adjacent to Long Beach Harbor) as a land base for the reconditioning of the Sikorsky.

With preparations made in Long Beach, Probert returned to Lima, where he and the mechanics went to work readying 881 for the long trip to her new home. Immediately, they encountered various problems with the four radial engines. Because the Sikorsky had been in the sunshine and salt air for several months, there were mysterious troubles with spark plugs and magnetos. After several days trying to find airplane parts in Lima they were finally able to get the engines ready to power them north to the U.S. - or so they thought...

Confronted with over 1,000 miles of open-ocean flying to get his newly acquired ship from Peru to California, Probert decided to use celestial navigation — which is best done at night. So, his takeoff from Ancon Harbor was planned for just after sunset to take advantage of the night skies aloft. The takeoff went smoothly, but after about 10 minutes, and almost simultaneously, the magnetos in two of the four engines malfunctioned, forcing Dick to circle back to Ancon Harbor to look for a place to set the big ship down. The odds were certainly stacked against him. He was going to attempt a night landing in an unlit harbor, in an unfamiliar ship that was overloaded with gasoline and spare parts. When describing this particular adventure, Probert stated that this was the scariest situation he had ever been in.

Probert said, “It was a time when I should have been scared, but don’t remember being scared.” For this emergency landing he had “strangers for a crew, only two takeoffs and landings in the ship, it was night time with no moon, no lights were required on boats in the harbor, the maximum fuel load was 3,800 gallons - but we had 4,200 gallons on board, so we tried a landing outside the harbor. I flew over the town at night with a low propeller pitch setting — to create the maximum amount of noise to attract attention — and then I set controls for steady descent at 200 fpm and then waited for something to happen. During the 10 years that I flew the Sikorsky, that was the best landing I ever had.” Despite the odds, Probert landed safely that night back in Peru.

After numerous attempts to diagnose and remedy the magneto troubles, the ship was again ready for the long flight up the coast of South America, Central America, Mexico, and on to her new home in Long Beach. But, the adventure was not over yet because, during this final takeoff from Peru, the starboard pontoon caught on the water and broke exactly in half — lodging in the wing. Figuring that the repair facilities in Ancon were less desirable for fixing the float and wing problem, Dick continued flying on toward Mexico with the float stuck firmly in the wing. After flying all night, they landed at 9:30

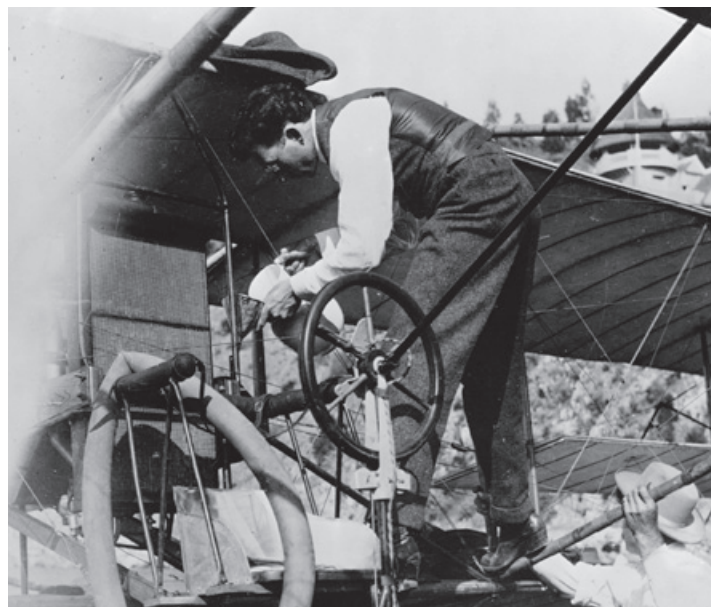


*The starboard pontoon was embedded in the wing for the 2,500-mile flight from Ancon, Peru, to Acapulco, Mexico, (Photo from the Dick & Nancy Probert collection).*

a.m. in Acapulco. After many (sometimes heated) discussions with the Mexican authorities, repairs and some payments were made, they were finally granted permission for departure. Dick and his crew then successfully made it back to Long Beach with 881 (with about 15 minutes of gas left in the tanks).

### **Early Flying Boats in Avalon Bay**

Dick Probert and Walt von Kleinsmid were not the first to contemplate flying from the mainland to Catalina Island. In fact, Southern California was a perfect setting for the fledgling aviation industry at the beginning of the 20th century. The first flight ever from the mainland across the channel to Avalon Bay was flown by the aviation pioneer Glenn Martin in May 1912. The 25-year-old aviator had constructed his own plane



*Glenn Martin checks his fuel in Avalon. (Photo courtesy of Catalina Island Museum).*



*A mid-1960s summertime scene in Avalon Bay showing N41881 at the dock. Note the Grumman Goose at the end of the dock just to the left of the Sikorsky. (Scanned postcard from the author's collection).*

in an abandoned church in Santa Ana, Calif., and then flew it from Newport Beach to Avalon Bay. He had originally built his ship as a land plane, but just for this flight, he replaced the wheels with a skiff that belonged to a friend. The flight covered 33 miles in 37 minutes in the home-built airplane. It was the longest over ocean flight at that time. In a *Los Angeles Examiner* article dated May 11, 1912 Martin is quoted as saying:

“I was confident, had no fear; trip was great joy.”

Martin commemorated that first flight on its 25th anniversary when he returned during a special trip to the bay in 1937 with another of his aircraft - the Martin M-130 *China Clipper*.

Other early flying boat operations to Catalina included: movie star Charlie Chaplin and his half-brother Syd Chaplin who formed Chaplin Air Line in 1919 servicing Catalina using a single Curtiss Seagull flying boat. It was just the third scheduled airline passenger service in the entire US. In addition, from 1931 until the start of WWII, Wilmington-Catalina Airline employed a fleet of amphibious Douglas Dolphins carrying thousands of passengers using a base at Hamilton Cove. During WWII, the U.S. military virtually took over the island and its transportation until the end of the war. Following that, air transportation to the island was slow to recover in the late 1940s until Dick Probert's Avalon Air Transport began operations in 1952.

### **10 Years in Paradise**

Now in California, the big flying boat needed three things to blend with the Avalon Air Transport operation on the short route between the mainland and Santa Catalina Island. 881 received a complete inspection and refit, a new seaplane base on the mainland, and docking facilities were expanded in Avalon Bay.



*Dick Probert taking 881 out of mothballs at Reeves Field before the start of the summer tourist season. Note the Vincent Thomas Bridge under construction in the background. (Photo from Dick & Nancy Probert collection).*



*Pacific Landing in Long Beach Harbor was the mainland base for 881. (Photo from the Probert collection).*



*New look interior for 881 with seating for 47 passengers on the short trip between Avalon and Long Beach. (Photo from the Dick & Nancy Probert collection).*

For the Sikorsky, the exterior received a thorough going over and the new AAT livery was applied, the interior was reconfigured by removing the sleeping berths and installing new seating to accommodate 47 passengers. The new seaplane base on the mainland was located in Long Beach Harbor at Pacific Landing - right between The Reef Restaurant and where the HMS Queen Mary is now located. This base was the summer home for 881 from 1957-1967. Each fall - after the busy summer travel season - 881 was moved back to the old Naval Air Station (Reeves Field) on Terminal Island where she would remain until the spring when she would again be readied for the summer schedule. To address the docking situation in Avalon, two 50' floats extending from the end of the Avalon Pleasure Pier seaward were added with an additional 'L' float attached for the existing Grumman Goose operation.

With all preparations accomplished, AAT (renamed Catalina Air Lines in 1963) used 881 for 10 years on the short hop from Pacific Landing to Avalon Bay (27 miles in about 15 minutes). During those years, she made 8,172 such trips carrying tens of thousands of passengers. It should be noted that Dick Probert's wife Nancy Ince Probert was the stewardess on 7,178 of those flights!

### **Avalon Bay Operations**

Docking procedures for a large seaplane in the crowded bay took a little planning. While the base at Pacific Landing in Long Beach Harbor had substantial room for maneuvers - crowded Avalon Bay was another matter. The docking of 881 used a combination of three large ropes and two small boats. The three lines were - a pivot line permanently anchored to the bottom of the bay (using old railroad wheels as weights), a 15 ft bow line attached to the docks and a 100 ft tail line carried in one of the boats. The two boats were operated by dock boys - usually college kids on summer break from school. Several variables determined the outcome of each 881 docking, which occurred several times a day (sometimes up to a dozen). Those variable conditions included: wind, water, boat traffic and how much sleep the dock boys got the night before. After all, Avalon is a party town - especially during the summer. It is



*The pivot line for turning 881 around in Avalon Bay was installed by diver Al Hanson (in the water at the bow) as Dick Probert assists from the forward hatch. (Photo from the Dick & Nancy Probert collection).*



*Dick Probert, Nancy Ince Probert and co-pilot Lloyd Burkhard with 881 at the dock in Avalon. (Photo from the Dick & Nancy Probert collection).*



*Avalon dock boys of 1964 - (Top left) Mike Harris, David Turner, Greg Madden, Greg Harris, (bottom l-r) the author, John Lewis, Tom Davoli, and Bill Harvey. (Photo from the author's collection).*



The "Woody boat" and the "Tinny boat" (background) seen next to 881. (Photo from the author's collection).

amazing that - during the 10 years of operating 881 in and out of the bay - no real damage was done to the seaplane, the boats, nor the dock boys.

During the 1960s, every Wednesday was "freight day" for the dock crew on the seaplane docks. That was the day when the Sikorsky was loaded early in the morning at the Long Beach Harbor base with frozen food, meat and fresh bakery products headed for the island's grocery stores and restaurants. The freight was carried in the large bow compartments, the eight upper wing bins and the long tail of the flying boat.

The airline owner, chief pilot and pilot of the Sikorsky (Dick Probert - known to all employees of the airline as DP) was very demanding of his employees and was not shy about berating (or firing) anyone who didn't toe the mark. This could be demoralizing - especially for the dock crews who worked 12-hour days, for low pay and performed a physical and fairly dangerous job that combined boats, the ocean and large, spinning propellers on moving aircraft. If any severe chastising was rendered by DP on a freight day, the dock foreman would later say to the station manager (SM), "It looks as if one of the



Freight day was a real work out for the dock crews at both the Long Beach Harbor and Avalon seaplane bases. Here, freight is being pulled from the eight wing bins. The author is on the dock about to catch a box of frozen orange juice while David Turner, Joe Waldman, and Tom Flood toss boxes that they will deliver around the town (Photo by a visiting former Pan Am employee - from the author's collection).



881 approaches with the copilot in the forward hatch waiting to take the pivot line from the dock boy. Note that the right-outboard engine is the only power being applied. (Photo from a scanned postcard from the author's collection).

cheesecakes got loaded upside down in the tail of 881." To which the SM would say something like, "Hummm, that bad,... well, okay." Then the dock boys (and sometimes the SM) got a large slice of slightly-squashed cheesecake to help with any morale problems for the rest of the morning. Turn around time in Avalon for the fully-loaded flying boat was about 20 minutes. The photographer for the photo showing freight being unloaded was a former employee of Pan American Airways at one of their seaplane bases who said that he was impressed with the speedy turnaround.

The Sikorsky's wing bins came in handy when the dock boys in Avalon had scheduled any large-scale beach parties. For a number of reasons, they could not purchase kegs of cold beer from any of the vendors on the island. So, the day of the party the Avalon crew would have a keg delivered to The Reef Restaurant (restaurant owner David Tallichet allowed the use of his cooler) where the keg would be kept until being loaded in a wing bin on 881 and flown to Avalon. The island dock crew would then stash the keg in the cooler at the Avalon Fish Market (20 ft behind our office on the Pleasure Pier) until time to take it to the party.

### Last of An Era

By 1967, FAA regulations required that Dick Probert (at age 60) retire from flying the big Sikorsky. So he decided to



Owner and chief pilot of Catalina Air Lines, Dick Probert makes a final fly-past with N41881 flanked by two CAL Grumman Gooses over the Avalon Pleasure Pier in 1967. Note the Sikorsky has flaps down [props stopped by camera shutter speed only]. (Photo courtesy of Warner McIntire).

sell 881 to — who else — the first pilot that had flown her, Charles Blair. DP felt that Charlie Blair and his Antilles Air Boats operation would be the perfect place for 881. Blair met Probert in Long Beach and the two of them flew 881 to the Virgin Islands. In January of 1969, 881 was damaged during a landing mishap and was stored on land in St. Croix. Several years after that - the flying boat was retired by Antilles Air Boats and donated to the Naval Air Museum in Pensacola, Florida. From there, she was transferred



*The author with his plans-built, radio controlled Grumman Goose in CAL colors.*

to the New England Air Museum where she underwent a complete restoration — a prodigious feat that took more than 10 years to complete. This major project involved a team of over 100 volunteers, including several of the employees who originally built her for Sikorsky in 1942. By 1998, when the restoration project was completed, with Dick Probert and his wife Nancy (Ince) Probert in attendance, Maureen O’Hara Blair dedicated the beautifully restored *Excambian* to the New England Air Museum NEAM at Windsor Locks, Connecticut. There, N41881 is now on permanent display where she can be seen and admired by future generations.

Thus, with the last of the big flying boats removed from the rolls of active airliners, ended one of the most important, romantic and historic eras in commercial aviation. Both the Atlantic and the Pacific had been conquered by Sikorsky, Martin, and Boeing flying boats. At the beginning of this very short period in history, the world appeared large and challenging. By the end of this Golden Age the world had become much smaller with airline travel rapidly changing from exciting adventure to simply a part of modern life. It was all over. Less than two dozen big seaplanes, stately flying ocean liners, had zoomed

onto the world stage, only to be overshadowed by land-based planes in less than 10 years. Then, they quietly slipped from view. Time had left them in its wake -- except for one...

#### **About the Author**

David Johnston grew up in Southern California - directly across Pacific Coast Hwy. from the Lomita Flight Strip (now Louis Zamperini Field) from 1942 to 1959. During summer break from college (1962) he began working for Avalon Air

Transport/Catalina Air Lines as a dock boy at the seaplane base in Avalon Bay surrounded by a fleet of Grumman Gooses and the last Sikorsky VS-44A. During the next seven years, he became the dock foreman and then station manager. David received a degree in history from Cal State University - Long Beach and has sponsored two Catalina Island Seaplane Reunions in Avalon (1997 and 2004). He appears as a guest speaker at air shows and seaplane events and has written the book *The Knights of Avalon - Seaplanes of Catalina Island*. ➔

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Sikorsky, Igor I. *Historical Archives Newsletter*, Sikorsky Heritage, March 2002.

#### **Web sites:**

“Wings Across the Channel” (DVD), <http://www.channelcatalina.com/storyofcatalina/>

*The Queen of the Sky* (VHS tape) <https://www.neam.org/>

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