

George Ruddell

Antilles' top Air Ace

By Paul Backshall



WHEN Antilles Air Boats President Charles Blair described quiet, unassuming George Ruddell as "Antilles' top air ace" I thought he was kidding, but after an hour or so of prying loose the wartime deeds of gentle George, I could see what he meant.

George is one of those people who is easy to talk to but hard to interview. He would kiss off four medals and half the Korean War with a phrase like ... "and a lot of other stuff not worth mentioning."

Then we would have to backtrack and get at the details like the time when his group attacked four Japanese ships in the Aleutians. He personally destroyed one ship and should have received a decoration, except that "the next day the wing commander got killed and it was forgotten about."

This was in World War II when George was 23 years old. And it was the start of a career as a fighter pilot that eventually earned him two Silver Stars, seven D.F.C.'s, one Soldier's Medal, a Bronze Star and the Air Medal with 29 clusters and the rank, before retirement, of Colonel.

One of the first exciting things that the young, civilian pilot ever did was sign-towing. It doesn't sound like much but with three planes towing one sign, it could be tricky.

"We were limited to 70 miles per hour, which is pretty close to stall speed anyway, but any faster and the signs would tear apart. Sometimes on takeoff, one plane would bear all the strain before the others took up the slack and at low speeds

you could find yourself in trouble."

But this just whetted young George's appetite for flying and he soon chalked up 600 hours flying time in 40 different types of aircraft.

By this time, he had his application in for the Army Air Corps and was ready to start training as a fighter pilot.

"I really wanted to join the Navy and fly off carriers," he confessed. But in those days there were not many flat tops around and he was afraid, he would end up scrubbing decks.

But by the time he was into his training the war was on and it was just a matter of time before he was in the air on his own and feeling rather like the proverbial "cannon fodder," being fired at by Japanese anti-aircraft guns in the Aleutians.

He returned to Florida for training in new fighter aircraft (this time P-47's) and was then assigned to southern England to begin operations into Europe.

The day he arrived in London, he had just checked into his hotel when there was an air raid and a bomb dropped just across the street, blowing the windows out and the door in and giving him his first taste of a blitz.

Flying over France, George's group offered ground support to the allied troops and suffered "pretty severe losses" from the German cannon. There were three squadrons in the group and within 13 months one lost 29 pilots, another 30 and the third 31.

Now a Major, George recalled,

"Our group had the highest flack position kills (wiping out German artillery positions) in the Ninth Air Force and my squadron was the highest in the group."

I asked him about some of those medals — the Silver Stars for instance. George didn't want to be pinned down to specifics, but I insisted.

"Well, one of them was while I was leading a squadron of 12 aircraft over France when 40 bandits appeared. I asked for volunteers who had enough fuel and ammunition left and four of us went after them."

They shot down three and damaged a fourth before disengaging and making an emergency landing for fuel in Normandy.

I wanted to hear about the other medals — the Soldier's Medal for example — how did a pilot get a Soldier's Medal?

George apparently was on the ground when a returning pilot crash-landed, flipped his aircraft and it caught fire. George and another man dragged the unconscious pilot clear just before the plane was destroyed.

"And the other Silver Star?" I pressed as George tried to change the subject.

"That was in Korea when we were outnumbered by a bunch of MIGs. I managed to shoot one down. The D.F.C.'s? One or two were in the Aleutians, the rest in Europe mostly. I suppose for showing the appropriate courage at the appropriate time, that sort of thing."

War memories? George has

plenty. Like when he was operating over Belgium during the German breakthrough. "The flack was really intense. We had lost a lot of men. I don't think you can win a war unless you hate and we had all the hate you needed."

You could see the memory was still painful and I didn't press the specifics too much. You lose a lot of friends in a war and George had been through three.

George wanted to fight the Germans. Of course, he felt fear just like anyone else and, just like his buddies, he wondered if he would

be among the lucky ones who came back at the end of an operation. "But once you get up there and the shooting starts, you are too busy to think about dying."

He returned home for rest and recreation and the day he was due to go back into action over Europe, the war ended and they refused to send him back to his unit.

In 1946, he got his regular commission and also joined the first jet group in the U.S. flying P-80's. Two years later he was offered a squadron of F-84's operating out of Hamilton Field in California. He was then instructing new pilots in prep-

aration for the formation of a new combat-ready squadron.

In 1953 he volunteered for Korea. Flying F-84's, he was on bombing and strafing missions and engaged in air to air combat with the MIG 15's. George claimed eight MIG's in Korea.

Following his stint in Korea he was stationed in Japan for three years. He made Colonel there and for the last 16 months he was Commander of the Fourth Fighter Group at Chitose.

Back in the U.S., he became Senior Advisor to the New Jersey National Guard and then was given command of an F-104 wing. This was the first operational aircraft to fly at twice the speed of sound and is often referred to as the fighter pilot's dream. "It was a fantastic aircraft," said George with a smile. "A real fighter pilot's aircraft."

We were sitting in a St. Thomas waterfront restaurant sipping fruit punch.

"Then to Vietnam," said George with a sigh, trying to summon up the memories in the right order and playing with the lettuce from a club sandwich. "I had a staff job this time — as Assistant Deputy Director of Operations of MAC V.," (overall military headquarters, embracing the Army, Air Force and the Marines).

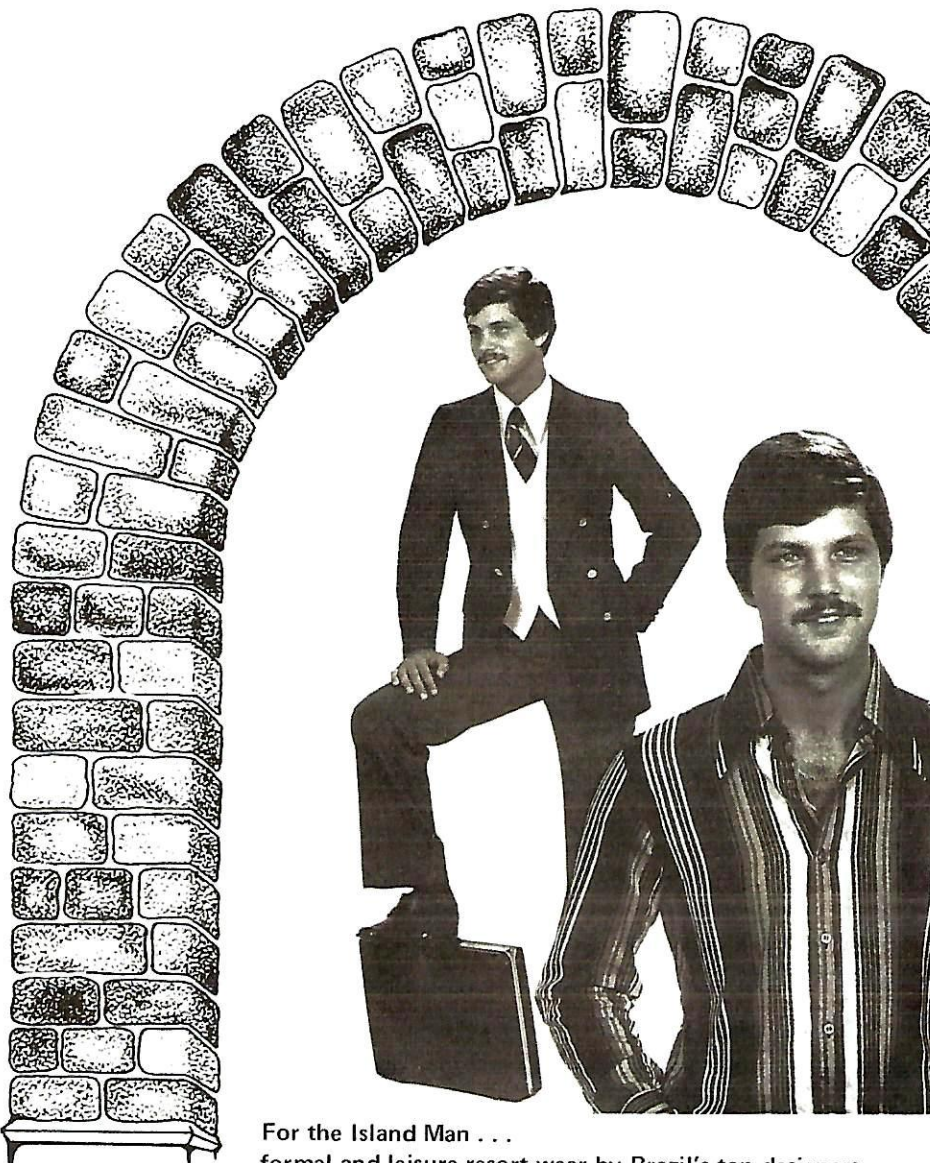
He had a family by this time — wife and three children and they were with him in 'Nam. "The war was not full blown then but there were quite a few terrorist attacks on restaurants and hotels etc.

"I remember I had just taken the kids to see a Saturday afternoon movie. We emerged from the theatre and the crowd went in for the next show. Just a few moments later a terrorist bomb went off in the theater killing three or four people and injuring many more."

He was also there when President Diem was overthrown. The Ruddells lived close to the Palace and during the coup there was a tank in front of the house and shells were howling over the roof into the Palace grounds. Then a machine-gun post was set up on his front porch and the family spent several hours on the floor.

U.S. military families were evacuated after a year and George soon joined them in the Philippines where he was an Inspector General, probing mainly into aircraft accidents.

A few more years were spent in the U.S., as Wing Commander of the 33rd Fighter Wing in Florida, flying the F-4 (most modern in the



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Vietnam conflict) and then as Assistant Director of Operations at the headquarters of the 9th Air Force in South Carolina.

He retired from the Air Force as Colonel while at the Langley Air Force base in Virginia in 1970 and came to the Virgin Islands on vacation.

He heard about the Antilles Air Boats operation and wrote to Captain Blair.

He has now been with the world's "largest seaplane airline" for five and a half years and whenever possible indulges in his favorite pastime — sailing — which he learned to do in the Philippines and perfected when he owned his own boat in Florida. (He even has three trophies for racing mixed in among his military decorations).

He doesn't have time to maintain his own boat now. Somehow retirement jobs don't seem to leave much time for leisure. But he goes sailing with friends whenever the opportunity or the offer comes up.

I guess, it's the lure of such a complete change of pace from zooming through the skies — even in a Goose.

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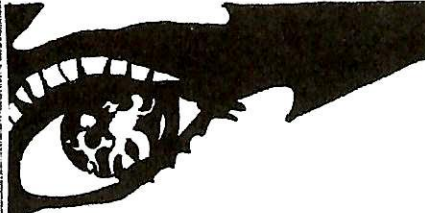


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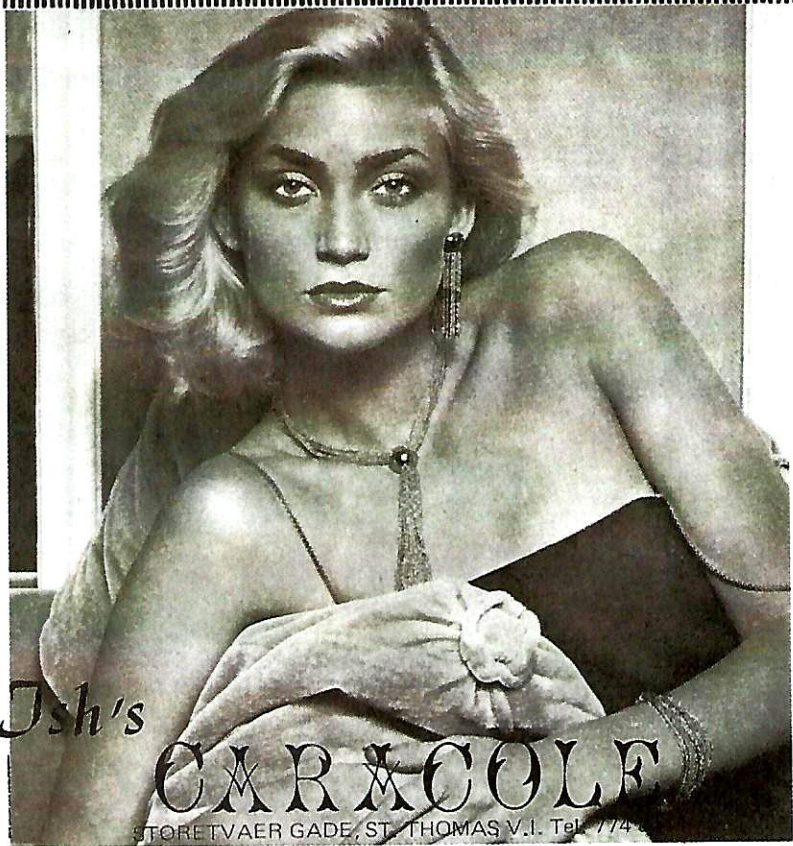
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